This year’s Birdquest tour to Japan in Winter was once again a wonderful safari of superb birds both large and small. We saw a thrilling six species of Cranes – the dancing Japanese Cranes of Hokkaido (always a favourite), plus the noisy and almost overwhelming hordes of Hooded and White-naped Cranes at Arasaki, that were joined by a few Sandhill and Common Cranes, and the big prize of a single immature Siberian Crane. The Eagles of the icy north score highly too, with our ‘Nature Cruise’ into the pack ice bringing us nose-to-nose with hundreds of Steller’s Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles, squabbling over the fish thrown out for them, all the time attended by swarms of large Gulls picking up the scraps. Also on Hokkaido the Blakiston’s Fish Owl appeared for us outside our comfortable lodge, plus we saw Red-faced Cormorants, Bufflehead and Surf Scoter. On Honshu we were lucky enough to find a female Scaly-sided Merganser, plus
Ural Owl, Baikal Teal, Grey-headed Lapwing, Long-billed Plovers, a male Pallas's Rosefinch, Long-tailed Rosefinches, a large flock of Japanese Waxwings, Japanese Accentors, Asian Rosy Finch and three Copper Pheasants! Add to this a visit to the enchanting Snow Monkeys of Nagano, and on Kyushu we saw Ryukyu Minivets, Black-faced Spoonbills and Saunders's Gull, plus the greatly enjoyable mini-pelagic for the Japanese Murrelets, it all added up to be a wonderful experience. As ever, this tour is often as much about the food as the birds (if that were actually ever possible!) and we dined very well on a very elegant cuisine.

Our tour began once we were all assembled at Narita airport, on a bright and sunny day. We traversed the vast metropolis of greater Tokyo with typical speed and efficiency, and headed towards the snowy mountains at high speed on board the Shinkansen 'bullet train'. Arriving at Karuizawa we made our first sortie into the snowy wonderland, crunching our way along the trails through the stark woodland. A soft call drew our attention to a vivid pink passerine feeding among the weeds – Pallas's Rosefinch! Virtually the first bird of the tour and a lifer for the leader! Hurrah! Nearby we also found a smart male Long-tailed Rosefinch, Japanese Green Woodpecker, Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers, a male Northern Red-flanked Bluetail and many Japanese Tits. A splendid start to our trip, we returned to our warm and comfortable hotel for a fine feast.

A pre-breakfast stroll in the woods began very well with the find of four Japanese Waxwings feeding in some mistletoe clumps, accompanied by the first flakes of falling snow. A short way up the trail we found a Ural Owl that flew across and perched in the open, peering down at us intruding into his snowy world. Along a snow-free stream were a few Dusky Thrushes and a Hawfinch, then an innocuous lump of brown moved and revealed itself to be a female Copper Pheasant! She fed along the streambed and we were able to creep ever closer until we were stood above her on the bank, as she continued feeding without a care just four or five metres from us! You lucky people! After some breakfast the snow grew heavier so we then opted for a slow drive along forest roads, and just as we feared we might have bitten off more than we could chew, in ever deepening snow with nowhere to turn around we found a bolt had pierced the tyre wall and we had a serious flat! Luckily, with a sterling team effort (and the excellent tools provided by Toyota!) we were able to complete a wheel change and return safely to better roads. A short interlude followed where we returned to the car rental office and they gave us a new bus (for safety reasons!) and we set off once more in rather dreadful conditions to lower altitudes, to the Chikuma river and nearby lake which was 90% frozen. Nevertheless this area provided Smew, Goosander, Greater Scaup, Northern Pintail, and among the Eurasian Teal we found two vagrant Green-winged Teal. Along the river were several Long-billed Plovers, Green Sandpipers, Rustic, Meadow and Common Reed Buntings, Dusky and a single Pale Thrush, Japanese, Black-backed and Grey Wagtails, Daurian Redstarts and Long-tailed Rosefinches, our first White-cheeked Starlings and Oriental Turtle Doves, and a Northern Goshawk shot through to stir everything up. This was all seen in persistent rain, so after a circuit of the area we were wet through, and returned to base. A short return foray into the Karuizawa forests produced some noisy courting Brown Dippers, and a lively flock of 25 Japanese Waxwings!
Early birding around our hotel the next morning produced six Japanese Grosbeaks and a Brambling at the feeders, then after breakfast we headed back into the snow-bound woodland. We found the Ural Owl at his roost, and our friendly female Copper Pheasant reappeared in the stream for some more close viewing. The forest seemed quieter today, producing just a few Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers and a couple of Northern Red-flanked Bluetails, however a male Copper Pheasant was flushed from another steam bed and shot away from us at incredible speed. We drove along a winding mountain road, almost traffic-free (probably due to the road being covered in ice!) which provided a real bonus as we found three Japanese Accentors feeding along the verge, wonderfully tame and obliging, and yet another female Copper Pheasant, standing in the roadside snow! We checked some mostly ice-bound lakes where we found more Long-tailed Rosefinches and Bluetails, and in cultivated areas found many Meadow and Rustic Buntings along with our first Elegant Buntings, a lovely pair of Grey-bellied Bullfinches, and a Chinese Hwamei. One last stop, for a photo of a bridge, yielded a lovely and unexpected flock of Asian Rosy Finches that fed along the shores of a reservoir.

We awoke to a crispy minus 10 degrees C, and once we had watched the early morning visit to the hotel’s feeders by the Japanese Grosbeaks, we headed off northwards. A couple of hours up the road and we reached the ‘Monkey Park’ where we had the exquisite experience of watching the Japanese Macaques or ‘Snow Monkeys’ bathing and squabbling in the thermally-heated pool. Also here was a very confiding Alpine Accentor, plus rather a lot of tourists visiting this wonderful attraction. From here we had a long drive up to the coast and then westwards along the highway to reach our destination of Kaga, a rather wild ride with blizzard conditions and high winds that threatened our progress, however some of the 40 tunnels we passed through today shielded us from the worst of the elements! A quick look at rice paddies in the last light of day revealed a group of Bewick’s Swans and a couple of Grey-headed Lapwing, but the weather really didn’t invite us to spend time outside of the bus!

Setting off on a ‘wild goose chase’ we eventually located the large flock of Greater White-fronted Geese that were dropping into the snow-covered rice fields, and with some careful manoeuvring we were able to get quite close. Despite the day starting well, the snow returned and persisted for most of the day, sometimes reducing visibility dramatically as big fluffy snowflakes filled the air. Stopping at one pond we found a large number of Falcated Ducks plus a couple of rather impure looking American Wigeon, but at the coast we could barely see the sea, so we headed for Katano duck pond and took refuge along with our picnic supplies in the comfortable observatory. Some 1200 Baikal Teal were the main attraction here, also roosting with snow-covered backs were both Tundra and Taiga Bean Geese, and a drake Smew. By early afternoon the sky cleared and the sun returned so we headed for the coast where a short seawatch produced Black-throated and Red-throated Divers, a small party of Ancient Murrelet and a Red-necked Grebe wrestling with a flatfish, while a pair of Ospreys called overhead. On snow-choked fields we found some forlorn-looking Grey-headed Lapwings and a couple of Long-billed Plovers, and at a fishing port we threw scraps to the circling Black-eared Kites, and saw our first Black-tailed, Slaty-backed and Vega Gulls. At a nearby headland
we saw a collection of Pelagic and Temminck's Cormorants, and a Peregrine perched on a dead tree, but then the snow returned everything to white. One last foray before the end of the day fortunately coincided with another break in the weather and we were able to get close to a wonderfully vocal flock of Bewick's Swans feeding in the rice stubble.

Another snowy morning followed, with 20cm of fluffy white stuff piled up on the cars. We drove the short way to Komatsu airport, en route finding a picturesque flock of five Grey-headed Lapwings standing in a snow-covered rice paddy. We flew from here to Fukuoka in Kyushu, and picking up a new minibus, we went whizzing down the motorway to the mudflats of the Kuma river. Arriving to find it was high tide, we found the birds were being pushed ever higher onto the last remaining mud, which was conveniently situated close to the bank that we watched from. Here were a flock of delightful Saunder's Gulls, some of which were attaining breeding plumage with black heads, periodically calling with squeaky yelps, almost drowned out by the nervous calls of the Grey Plovers that shared the ever decreasing mud, until it was all gone and away they went. All of this was under blue skies with the evening sun lighting them up, a welcome change after the challenging weather we had experienced over the last couple of days. Also here were hundreds of Dunlin, several Common Greenshank, and a flock of Vega Gulls that also held three *taimyrensis* Heuglin's Gulls, Ospreys prowled around and were seen to catch fish, while on the landward side we saw a flock of Russet Sparrows and Buff-bellied Pipits. From here we headed onwards to the south and our accommodation at Arasaki, arriving after dark yet within earshot of the bugling of Cranes.

At Arasaki we began early in the half-light of dawn, and watched the throng of Cranes dropping out of the sky to where grain had been put out for them. They formed a dense scrum, with Hooded Cranes being the
most numerous (some 10,000 here) and we quickly found two Sandhill Cranes and a couple of Common Cranes. The most elegant of them, the White-naped Crane, began to arrive in small groups, and then the rarest of them all, an immature Siberian Crane, also landed to join the melee. Also here were a dozen Daurian Jackdaws (though none in pied plumage) amid a big flock of Oriental Rook, Buff-bellied Pipits and Japanese Skylarks were also in good number here, and a party of Temminck’s Stint were a first for this tour. We managed to glimpse Japanese Bush Warbler, then had a big surprise when a Japanese Marten appeared on a reedy bank with a long snake in its jaws! We headed back to our minshuku for a splendid breakfast, and then returned to the milling Crane flocks that were literally just outside of the windows! We explored fields where we found Chestnut-eared Bunting and a big flock of Brambling, then had to tear our photographers away from the Crane-fest and go in search of other birds. Further south along the coast we found another Green-winged Teal on a river, saw some Temminck’s Cormorants along the rocky coast, and struggled in dark woodlands to get views of some skulking Grey Buntings. Pale Thrushes and Black-faced Buntings were in good number however, and then we headed back to the Cranes of Arasaki, to take advantage of the afternoon sunshine bathing them in the kindest of light.

Another dawn patrol in the east fields for the Crane spectacular, this time with perfectly clear light and an orange sky to photograph the skeins of birds against. In addition to the usual suspects, overhead came the Siberian Crane, a Eurasian Spoonbill and a Bewick’s Swan. Along the margins of the cultivated area we found Northern Goshawk and Japanese Bush Warbler, and visible from the Crane Observatory were two Eurasian and a single Black-faced Spoonbill, all mostly asleep. It was time for to bid farewell to our friendly hosts (and their wonderful food) and head off for our next destination. We went southwards to Satsuma to where we hoped to find Scaly-sided Merganser, and on arriving we scanned the river and found a lone female. Trying to get closer and peer through the thick bamboo alongside the river proved difficult, and we assumed the bird had departed on our approach. We cast our net wider without success, and returning to the same spot we found a Crested Kingfisher, and then re-found the Merganser! We managed to get a little closer to it for better views, in doing so we stumbled upon a White’s Thrush; all in all a successful stop at this picturesque area! We then headed for Miike and explored around the lake, finding Daurian Redstart and Pale Thrushes but little else, and an attempt to find some tracks into the forests on the slopes of Mount Kirishima hit the buffers when we found them all to be blocked off. At our comfortable Onsen hotel here, we enjoyed one of the best dinners of the tour.

An early start saw us speeding along the highway to an area of fields and woods with yet another duck pond covered in wildfowl, where several Mandarin Ducks roosted quietly under the trees. Also here we found our target of Ryukyu Minivet, a quartet of White-bellied Green Pigeons, numerous Japanese Grosbeaks, Bramblings, Eurasian Siskins, Elegant Buntings, Olive-backed Pipits and Japanese White-eyes. Moving on from here to the port of Kadogawa, we joined a boat to take us out onto the open sea to find the gorgeously cute Japanese Murrelet. The harbour itself was full of Black-eared Kites and Vega Gulls, and as the weather was so fine, we cruised all the way out to the offshore island here, finding eleven of these delightful ‘Sea...
Sparrows' swimming about happily and diving around the boat, plus some lavender-hued Pacific Reef Egrets stood on the rocks. Next we travelled down the coast to the Hitotsuse estuary where we stumbled upon some surprises, with 14 Black-faced Spoonbills roosting together with one Eurasian Spoonbill, three Long-billed Dowitcher (a scarce winter visitor) plus some Common Snipe, a Black-winged Stilt and several Black-necked Grebes. A fine days' birding indeed.

As we left our fine lodgings at Mi-ike, we paid a visit to the woods around the lake there. A quiet morning with White-backed Woodpecker playing hard to get and only showing us his shadow, plus Eurasian Nuthatch, Goldcrests, Winter Wren, Elegant Bunting and a calling White-bellied Green Pigeon heard distantly. We sped away from here to Kagoshima, and flew from here to Haneda. We had a stressfully tight connection - landing with just 20 minutes to spare before our flight to Kushiro, yet we were met by airport staff and taken by minibus across the tarmac to meet our next flight! Such service is typical of this wonderful country, and our bags even made it too! (take note, KLM!) We arrived in snowy Hokkaido and drove to our comfortable hotel in Tsurui, ready for the delights of the Tancho the following morning, while the mercury was heading south of minus 11 degrees as we went to bed!

A very cool morning and an early start was in order, and we joined the dawn throng of photographers standing overlooking the roost of Red-crowned Cranes on the Setsuri river. It was minus 15.2 Celsius, but it felt fine! The Cranes didn't really do much this morning, but the setting was very atmospheric; a Red Fox skipped across the riverbank, Goosanders flew back and forth, and a surprise pair of Crested Kingfishers flew by. Returning to our warm hotel for a welcome breakfast, we then returned to the snowy fields around the village and spent a couple of hours enjoying this most beautiful of Cranes, dancing and trumpeting in the morning sun, and periodically chasing off the accompanying Whooper Swans. We then drove across country, and reaching the east-facing coast we drove a way up the Notsuke peninsula, finding Stejneger's Scoter among the numerous Black Scoter flocks, Common Goldeneye, our first Spectacled Guillemot, and several White-tailed Eagles. Nearby in the harbour at Shibetsu we found our first Glaucous-winged Gulls, Greater Scaup, Red-breasted Merganser and some gorgeous Harlequin Ducks. Further along the coast near our destination we found a male Bufflehead, plus many Glaucous and Slaty-backed Gulls, before heading to our minshuku where dozens of Steller's Sea Eagles were going to roost in the trees lining the valley. We had a feast of Kamchatka Crab before commencing our vigil for the Owl, overlooking the floodlit stream. The birds didn't show, didn't show, didn't show....

Waking the next morning I discovered the bird had shown, at 0310hrs, and fortunately our entire group had seen it, even if the leader hadn't! Anyway, after breakfast, we peered out onto a gloomy landscape with snow falling and poor visibility. We headed down to the port, and boarded our Nature Cruise, which whisked us out to the pack ice just a couple of kilometres offshore, and so began the visual feast of White-tailed and Steller's Sea Eagles coming to feed on the fish thrown to them by the crew. In addition were hundreds of Slaty-backed, Glaucous and Glaucous-winged gulls also taking advantage off the handouts. For two hours we looked on, awestruck, as this unique and fantastic spectacle unfolded in front of our eyes. The Eagles were
reluctant at first to come closer, presumably they didn't like flying around in the falling snow, but eventually in they came, ever closer, tussling and fighting over the food. After it was all over, we hit the road southwards, checking various harbours along the way to Nemuro, finding nice flocks of Common Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, Black Scoter and a couple of fine Long-tailed Duck.

A day around the Nemuro peninsula and its marine habitats provided us with a rather different day. We began before breakfast at Hanasaki harbour, where the pancake ice we had seen the previous afternoon had 'healed-over' to cover much of the inner harbour. In the outer sections we enjoyed some close Harlequin Ducks, the males resplendent in their breeding colours. After returning to the hotel for our breakfast, we headed out to Cape Nosappu, where although much of the open sea was strangled by pack ice we found numerous Spectacled Guillemots, a few Common and some Pigeon Guillemots, many Pelagic Cormorants plus the commoner Ducks. Nearby we found a very calm bay where the whistling of Black Scoter carried on the still air, and a return to the Cape revealed two Red-faced Cormorants sat on their regular rock. We bought our picnic lunch, which we took to a nearby harbour to sit and eat, the open water within the harbour walls was packed with sea duck. A female Surf Scoter was a nice find, and we had close views of Stejneger's Scoters, Northern Pintail, Greater Scaup and Red-breasted Mergansers. Heading back west we paused at various viewpoints and harbours, checking for new species, but the temperature was dropping to uncomfortable levels, and the birding was decidedly unproductive except for the ubiquitous Black Scoters and scatterings of White-tailed and Steller's Sea Eagles. The harbour at Nemuro itself was choked with pack ice, and then the snow returned...

We awoke the next day to find the snow ploughs making white mountains at the roadside, and our projected seawatch at Cape Kiritappu was cut short - despite the bright sunshine - due to the gale force winds lashing the island! We did collect a couple of extra Slavonian Grebes bobbing about on the water but finding Auklets seemed out of the question, so we headed off towards Kushiro. We paused in some woodland where we enjoyed a scenic walk punctuated by the brandti race of Eurasian Jay, some Marsh Tits and a Great Spotted Woodpecker, then it was time for the feeding frenzy at the Red-crowned Crane site nearby. Joining the ranks of paparazzi we had a wonderful show of the Cranes in kind sunshine, some being mugged by several White-tailed Eagles that dived into the melee of birds to grab the fish spread out for the Cranes. The snow returned once again so it was time to bid farewell to this enchanting island and catch our flight back to Narita, as always in the hands of the exquisite service provided by ANA.

A last stroll on a fine morning close to our hotel in Narita was very productive, with hordes of Black-faced Buntings, several Bull-headed Shrikes, some smart Brown-headed Thrushes (our target for the morning) and some showy male Long-tailed Rosefinches. Several Green Pheasants were calling and we managed to glimpse one that shot out of the bamboo briefly. A great way to wrap up our wonderful visit to this great country, it was then time to part company and go our separate ways. Japan in winter is a world-class array of spectacular wildlife, and an overall very impressive country, and I think I may not be the only one who is looking forward to returning!
Surf Scoter female

Bufflehead male

Long-tailed Duck male

Scaly-sided Merganser female
SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).
Species which only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO)
Species which were not personally recorded by the leaders are indicated by the symbol (NL)

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered ‘special’ birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two Birdquest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

Chinese Bamboo Partridge (introduced) *Bambusicola thoracicus* (H) Calling from thickets in Kyushu and Narita.
Copper Pheasant ◊ *Syrmaticus soemmerringii* Stunning close looks of a hen at Karuizawa, plus two others seen.
Japanese Green Pheasant ◊ *Phasianus versicolor* Eluded us until the final morning at Narita, one glimpsed.
Taiga Bean Goose ◊ *Anser fabalis* A handful of *middendorfii* on the lake at Katano Kamo-ike. See note.
Tundra Bean Goose ◊ *Anser rossicus* A fair number of *serrirostris* on the lake at Katano Kamo-ike. See note.
Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* 1000 in the fields near Mikune, watched in a snowstorm! See note.
Mute Swan (introduced) *Cygnus olor* Two on the river at Satsuma.
Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* Noisy and showy at Tsurui, a few at Odaito, odd birds seen elsewhere.
Bewick’s Swan *Cygnus bewickii* A great flock of 195 birds at Komatsu, a single at Arasaki.
Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* Good numbers on Kyushu at Yatsushiro and Hitosuse.
Mandarin Duck ◊ *Aix galericulata* Only found at Koda-o-ike, several seen there.
Gadwall *Anas strepera* Just two, at Katano Kamo-ike.
Falcated Duck ◊ *Anas falcata* Many near Mikune (76!) and another 50 at Katano Kamo-ike.
Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope* Numerous in many places on the tour.
American Wigeon *Anas americana* Two ‘impure’ males near Mikune, clearly mixed up with the previous species.
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Frequently encountered.

Eastern Spot-billed Duck *Anas zonorhyncha* Commonly encountered on Honshu and Kyushu.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* A small number seen along the way.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* Seen on various wetlands, also in harbours on Hokkaido

Baikal Teal ◊ *Anas formosa* A welcome horde at Katano Kamo-ike, with a rough estimate of 1200 birds! See note.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* Rather numerous, especially on the duck ponds of Honshu and Kyushu.

Green-winged Teal *Anas carolinensis* A surprise ‘write-in’; two males at Lake Toden, and another in Kyushu.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* A few seen, in several locations.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* Small numbers at several locations.

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* A few at Toden, many more in the harbours of Hokkaido.

Harlequin Duck ◊ *Histrionicus histrionicus* Good numbers around Hokkaido coasts and harbours.

Surf Scoter *Melanitta perspicillata* A female showed very closely at Habomai harbour on Hokkaido.

Stejneger’s Scoter ◊ *Melanitta stejnegeri* Small numbers seen around the coasts of Hokkaido.

Black Scoter ◊ *Melanitta americana* Very numerous around the coasts and harbours of Hokkaido. Pleasantly vocal.

Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis* A scattering of birds around the coasts and harbours of Hokkaido. So elegant.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* Rather common around the coasts of Hokkaido.

Smew *Mergellus albellus* Some fine males at Toden and Katano Kamo-ike, plus a few females seen.

Goosander (Common Merganser) *Mergus merganser* Rather common on Hokkaido, also at various sites elsewhere.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* Good numbers around the Hokkaido coast, especially at Hanasaki.

Scaly-sided Merganser ◊ *Mergus squamatus* A female seen on the river at Satsuma. See note.

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata* Singles off Kaga and Hokkaido.

Black-throated Diver ◊ *Gavia arctica* One or two off the coast near Kaga.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* Occasional sightings along our route, numerous at Hitotsuse.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena* One or two off the coast near Kaga.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* A couple at Kadogawa, one or two others seen.

Slavonian Grebe *Podiceps auritus* A single near Rausu on the sea, two more at Kititappu.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* A good number at Hitotsuse.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platlea leucorodia* A single with the following at Hitotsuse, plus two at Arasaki.

Black-faced Spoonbill ◊ *Platlea minor* A single at Arasaki, 14 at Hitotsuse. See note.

Eastern Cattle Egret *Bubulcus coromandus* Two flew over at Hitotsuse.

Great Egret *Ardea alba* Fairly regularly encountered, the commonest Egret in Japan.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* A good number at Arasaki.

Pacific Reef Egret *Egretta sacra* Some lovely lavender-coloured examples at Kadogawa

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* Seen throughout much of the tour.

Temminck’s Cormorant ◊ (Japanese C) *Phalacrocorax capillatus* A few seen, along rocky coasts.

Pelagic Cormorant ◊ *Phalacrocorax pelagicus* Some off Kaga, numerous in Hokkaido.

Red-faced Cormorant ◊ *Phalacrocorax urile* Two grumpy looking immature birds at Cape Nosappu.
Eurasian Kestrel (Common K) *Falco tinnunculus* A couple of singles seen.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* Great looks at one perched near Kaga, a couple of others seen elsewhere.

Eurasian Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* Seen in good number around the Kyushu coasts, also near Kaga.

**Black-eared Kite** *Milvus lineatus* The familiar ‘Tobi’, seen commonly especially around the coasts.

**White-tailed Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla* Numerous in Hokkaido, some at arms length on our ‘nature cruise’.

**Steller’s Sea Eagle** *Haliaeetus pelagicus* Like the above, with 200+ seen on our cruise and at Rausu. See note

**Eurasian Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus* Several examples seen whizzing past.

**Northern Goshawk** *Accipiter gentilis* Nice looks at Arasaki, also seen at Toden.

**Eastern Buzzard** (Japanese B) *Buteo japonicus* Scattered sightings, often while driving.

**Ruddy-breasted Crake** *Porzana fusca* (NL) One seen at Hitotsuse.

**Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus* A few seen on Kyushu.

**Common Coot (Eurasian C)** *Fulica atra* Regular sightings, often on the various ‘duck ponds’.

**Siberian Crane** *Grus leucogeranus* A juvenile bird at Arasaki was thrilling. See note.

**Sandhill Crane** *Grus canadensis* At least two among the Crane hordes at Arasaki.

**White-naped Crane** *Grus vipio* The second most numerous Crane at Arasaki, an elegant giant. See note.

**Common Crane** *Grus grus* A few singles kept popping up at Arasaki.

**Hooded Crane** *Grus monacha* Many of the 10,000 present kept us entertained at Arasaki. See note.

**Red-crowned Crane** (Japanese C) *Grus japonensis* The most beautiful Crane, showing off on Hokkaido. See note.

**Black-winged Stilt** *Himantopus himantopus* A single at Hitotsuse.

**Northern Lapwing** *Vanellus vanellus* In good numbers at Arasaki, at least 25 in one flock.

**Grey-headed Lapwing** *Vanellus cinereus* Rather comical to see these standing in snow at Kaga!

**Grey Plover** *Pluvialis squatarola* A very vocal flock at Yatsushiro.

**Long-billed Plover** *Charadrius placidus* Four seen at Toden, another two on snowy paddies at Kaga.
Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* A few seen at Yatsushiro before the rising tide drove them off.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* Scattered sightings around Kyushu, in the open at Hitotsuse.

Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus* Three feeding together at Hitotsuse, a scarce winter visitor.

Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* A couple seen at Yatsushiro.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* A dozen at Yatsushiro.

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* Several at Toden, odd singles seen elsewhere

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* Several seen around our route.

Temminck’s Stint *Calidris temminckii* A surprise ‘write-in’, three or more at Arasaki.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* A good number at Yatsushiro, also seen at Hanasaki.

Black-tailed Gull ◊ *Larus crassirostris* In numbers on Kyushu, plus some near Kaga.

Kamchatka Gull ◊ *Larus kamtschatschensis* Only on Hokkaido where we found quite a few around the harbours.

Glaucous-winged Gull ◊ *Larus glaucescens* Many around the Hokkaido coasts

Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus* Seen in good numbers around the Hokkaido coasts, mostly immatures.

Vega Gull ◊ *Larus vegae* Seen on the coasts of Honshu and Kyushu.

Slaty-backed Gull ◊ *Larus schistisagus* Very common on Hokkaido, a handful near Kaga.

Heuglin’s Gull ◊ *Larus heuglini* A handful of *taimyrensis* birds with yellow legs seen at Yatsushiro. See note.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* Seen in numbers at Yatsushiro, others at Kadogawa and Hokkaido.

Saunders’s Gull *Saundersia sandersi* Great close views at Yatsushiro, some in breeding plumage. See note.

Common Guillemot *Uria aalge* A handful seen from Cape Nosappu.

Saunder’s Gull ◊ *Saundersia sandersi* First seen from Notsuke, then numerous off Cape Nosappu.

Spectacled Guillemot ◊ *Cepphus carbo* A flock of 10 showed poorly off the Kaga coastal area.

Japanese Murrelet ◊ *Synthliboramphus antiquus* A flock of 10 showed poorly off the Kaga coastal area.

Japanese Murrelet ◊ *Synthliboramphus wumizusume* A highlight of the trip, with 11 seen off Kadogawa. See note.

Rock Dove (feral) *Columba livia* Frequently encountered.

Oriental Turtle Dove (Rufous T D) *Streptopelia orientalis* Seen commonly on Honshu.

White-bellied Green Pigeon ◊ (Japanese Green P) *Treron sieboldii* Brief fly-bys at Koda-o-ike, heard at Mi-iike.

Blakiston’s Fish Owl ◊ *Bubo blakistoni* One at Rausu visited three times at 0300hrs, seen by (almost) all!

Ural Owl *Strix uralensis* A nice look at a roosting bird on two consecutive mornings at Karuizawa. See note.

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* A few seen along our route.

Crested Kingfisher *Megaceryle lugubris* Several good sightings in Kyushu, plus a pair at Tsurui on Hokkaido.

Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker ◊ *Yungipicus kizuki* Seen well at Karuizawa, Mi-iike and several other localities.

White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos* One seen at Karuizawa, a couple of shadows glimpsed at Mi-iike.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* Several examples seen in various woodlands.

Japanese Woodpecker ◊ (Japanese Green W) *Picus awokera* Just a few sightings at Karuizawa.

Ryukyu Minivet ◊ *Pericrocotus tegimae* Flighty, but up to four seen well at Koda-o-ike, also one at Mi-iike.
Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*  Seen at Karuizawa and on Hokkaido. See note.  
Azure-winged Magpie ♦ *Cyanopica cyanus* (LO) A flock seen from the van en-route to Kaga  
Daurian Jackdaw *Coloeus dauricus*  At least 12 at Arasaki, although no ‘pied’ adult birds were seen.  
Oriental Rook *Corvus pastinator*  Good numbers at Arasaki.  
Oriental Crow ♦ *Corvus orientalis*  Common throughout, and often on the shorelines.  
Large-billed Crow *Corvus japonensis*  Common throughout, and more numerous (and vocal) than the above.  
Japanese Waxwing *Bombycilla japonica*  By no means annual, we saw as many as 29 birds at Karuizawa. Sweet!  
Eastern Great Tit (Japanese T) *Parus minor*  Common in the woods at Karuizawa, odd birds elsewhere.  
Coal Tit *Periparus ater*  Seen in the Karuizawa woodlands.  
Japanese Varied Tit ♦ *Poecile varius*  Seen well at Karuizawa, also on Kyushu.  
Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris*  Seen on Hokkaido at Tsurui and Akan.  
Willow Tit *Poecile montanus*  Found in the woodlands at Karuizawa.  
Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*  Flocks seen at several sites on Kyushu.  

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Asian House Martin *Delichon dasypus* (NL)  Seen en-route from Fukuoka.  
Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*  Seen at Karuizawa, on Kyushu, and also Hokkaido. See note.  
Japanese Skylark ♦ *Alauda japonica*  In good number at Arasaki.  
Brown-eared Bulbul ♦ *Hypsipetes amaurotis*  Seen throughout Honshu and Kyushu, just a couple on Hokkaido.  
Japanese Bush Warbler ♦ *Cettia diphone*  Several good sightings of this demure fellow, all on Kyushu.  
Chinese Hwamei (introduced) *Garrulax canorus*  A single seen in gardens near Karuizawa.  
Japanese White-eye ♦ *Zosterops japonicus*  Several sightings, all on Kyushu.  
Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*  Seen in the Karuizawa area and at Miike.  
Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*  Seen at Karuizawa and at Mi-ike.  
Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*  Seen commonly at Karuizawa, one at Mi-ike, a few on Hokkaido. See note.  
Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris*  One at the Snow Monkey park.  
White-cheeked Starling ♦ *Sturnus cineraceus*  Regularly seen on Honshu and Kyushu.  
White’s Thrush ♦ *Zoothera aurea*  Good looks at one at Satsuma, a bonus of the Scaly-sided Merganser twitch.  
Pale Thrush ♦ *Turdus pallidus*  Singles seen around Karuizawa, fairly common in the woods on Kyushu.  
Brown-headed Thrush ♦ *Turdus chrysolaus*  Several seen by our Narita hotel, a fine late addition to the list.  
Dusky Thrush *Turdus eunomus*  Seen on all three islands, though less commonly on Hokkaido.  
Red-flanked Bluetail *Tarsiger cyanura*  Some good examples seen at Karuizawa, a couple also on Kyushu.  
Daurian Redstart ♦ *Phoenicurus auroreus*  A small number on Honshu, then fairly frequently on Kyushu.  
Blue Rock-Thrush *Monticola solitarius*  A couple near Kaga, more seen on Kyushu, all of the philippensis race.  
Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasi*  Three or more seen at Karuizawa, also one at Rausu outside our lodge.  
Russet Sparrow *Passer rutilans*  A big flock at Yatsushiro, also some at Arasaki.  
Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*  Seen throughout.  
Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris*  A very tame single at the Snow Monkey park.
Japanese Accentor ♦ *Prunella rubida* Nice looks at three along the roadsides near Karuizawa.

Eastern Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla tschutschensis* Two at Hitotsuse estuary.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* Odd birds seen on Honshu and Kyushu.

Black-backed Wagtail ♦ *Motacilla lugens* Seen rather commonly on Kyushu, with smaller numbers on Honshu.

Japanese Wagtail ♦ *Motacilla grandis* Never common, found in the Karuizawa area, Kaga and Satsuma.

Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni* Eight seen at Koda-o-ike.

Buff-bellied Pipit *Anthus rubescens* First seen at Yatsushiro, then commonly at Arasaki.

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla* One at Karuizawa, hundreds at Arasaki, also at Koda-o-ike.

Oriental Greenfinch (Grey-capped G) *Carduelis sinica* Common around Karuizawa, and on Kyushu.

Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis spinus* Ten seen at Koda-o-ike.

Asian Rosy Finch *Leucosticte arctoa* A photo-stop near Karuizawa provided a meeting with a flock of 30. See note.

Long-tailed Rosefinch ♦ *Uragus sibiricus* Some gorgeous examples seen in the Karuizawa woods and also at Narita.

Pallas’s Rosefinch *Carpodacus roseus* A big thrill on the first day at Karuizawa, a male showed well in the woods.

Grey-bellied Bullfinch ♦ *Pyrrhula griseiventris* Some fine examples seen near Karuizawa, and also on Hokkaido.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* Seen around Karuizawa, a few on Kyushu, and also at Narita.

Japanese Grosbeak ♦ *Eophona personata* A small flock at our Karuizawa hotel, in good numbers also on Kyushu.

Meadow Bunting ♦ *Emberiza cioides* Not uncommon on Honshu and Kyushu.

Chestnut-eared Bunting ♦ *Emberiza fucata* A few at Arasaki, also seen at Hitotsuse.

Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica* Not uncommon around Karuizawa, also seen on Kyushu.

Elegant Bunting *Emberiza elegans* Three near Karuizawa, a few more showed well on Kyushu.

Black-faced Bunting ♦ *Emberiza spodocephala* Most common on Kyushu and at Narita, a few at Karuizawa.

Grey Bunting ♦ *Emberiza variabilis* Some very elusive birds at Sendai and Mi-ike showed little of themselves to us.

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* Seen at Arasaki and Hitotsuse, also some at Lake Toden.

**MAMMALS**

Japanese Squirrel *Sciurus lis* (NL) One at Karuizawa.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* Some nice examples on Hokkaido, with very thick fur!

Raccoon-Dog *Nyctereutes procyonoides* (NL) One at Arasaki, plus a roadkill specimen at Koda-o-ike.

Largha Seal *Phoca largha* We thought we saw this, from Cape Nosappu and at Rausu, but a tough I.D.

Harbour Seal (Common Seal) *Phoca vitulina* Also seen on Hokkaido, or so we thought...

Japanese Marten *Martes melampus* Great views of this handsome fellow, carrying a three-foot snake!

Japanese Macaque *Macaca fuscata* Only seen at the Nagano hot springs, using their alias of ‘Snow Monkey’.

Sika Deer *Cervus nippon* Common in Hokkaido.

[Japanese Serow *Capricornis crispus* – tracks only, at Karuizawa]
NOTES TO THE SYSTEMATIC LIST

The most up to date referenced taxonomic list referred to in the Tour Report is that of the IOC World Bird Names. Gill, F and Donsker, D. 2012. IOC World Bird Names (v2.11). Available at http://www.worldbirdnames.org

Taiga Bean Goose *Anser fabalis* The birds we saw on the pond at Katano Kamo-ike were of the *middendorffii* race that shows a longer bill and neck and is larger than the following species.

Tundra Bean Goose *Anser rossicus* These birds of the *serrirostris* race were alongside the previous species on the pond at Katano Kamo-ike, and were in the minority. This allowed for comparisons in the structural differences between the two, with these showing shorter and stockier necks, stubbier bills and more rounded heads.

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* The race concerned is *frontalis*.

Baikal Teal *Anas formosa* A swarm of 1200 birds were present at their usual wintering site at Katano Kamo-ike, although mostly on the far side of the lake! The bulk of the world population spends the winter at a handful of sites in South Korea, where at one site 1.06 million birds were counted in January 2009!

Scaly-sided Merganser *Mergus squamatus* A female seen on the river at Satsuma, a rare visitor from continental Asia. It is an almost annual winter vagrant to Japan in very small numbers, typically wintering in eastern China and Korea, but the main wintering grounds are unknown. It is listed as ‘Endangered’ by Birdlife, with a world population of 2400 – 4500 individuals.

Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor* One at Arasaki, and a group of 14 roosting at Hitotsuse. 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. (We saw 0.56 of the world population!)

Steller’s Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus* The concentrations of this huge beast in eastern Hokkaido are undoubtedly one of the world’s greatest avian spectacles, and would be one of the biggest highlights of the trip even without a boat ride into the pack-ice! 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.

Siberian Crane *Grus leucogeranus* A first-year immature seen at Arasaki, where it is a less-than-annual vagrant. This species is listed as ‘Critically Endangered’, with a western and eastern population of the which the former is reduced to four birds, the latter numbers 3500 – 4000 birds and winters almost exclusively at Poyang Lake in China.

White-naped Crane *Grus vipio* While they never seemed numerous compared to the Hooded Cranes, there were supposed to be a couple of thousand at Arasaki. Such a beautiful bird, if it were seen on the last day of the tour, it would stand a good chance to make it as ‘bird-of-the-trip’! This is another globally threatened species listed as ‘Vulnerable’ by Birdlife, with a world population of about 3900 mature individuals.

Hooded Crane *Grus monacha* A stunning spectacle at Arasaki, where as many as 10500 birds are estimated to be present. The official population (also wintering in China and Korea) estimate is only 11500, and it is listed by Birdlife as ‘Vulnerable’, because of its reliance on just a few wintering sites such as. It breeds in such remote parts of south-east Siberia that its nest went undiscovered till 1974!

Red-crowned Crane (Japanese C) *Grus japonensis* Surely one of the most beautiful birds in the world. Our first were at dawn in the Setsurigawa River roost (at -15 C!) then we watched at three other locations and saw their full range, dancing and prancing on the sparkling snow. or tussling with the White-tailed Eagles that came swooping in to steal their fish at Tancho No Sato! It is the world’s second rarest crane, with a total population of only 2750 birds, 900 of which are resident in Hokkaido. It is listed as ‘Endangered’ by Birdlife.

Heuglin’s Gull *Larus heuglini* Just three seen with the rather small gull flock at Yatsushiro, yellowish-legged birds referable to the *taimyrensis* form. This is a gull with confusing and complex taxonomy! These paler-backed ‘taimyrensis’ birds are considered by some as intergrades between the nominate *heuglini* and Vega Gull, originating from a ‘hybrid swarm’. Hours of fun for Gull lovers!

Saunders’s Gull *Saundersilarus Saundersi* Great views of up to 32+ birds on the mudflats at Yatsushiro. Now placed in its own genus, it’s a Gull with a distinct character, calling like a Tern and feeding by foraging for crabs over the mud not unlike a Gull-billed Tern. With a total world population estimated at only 7,100-9,600 birds, it is currently listed by Birdlife as ‘Vulnerable’.

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Japanese Murrelet *Synthliboramphus wumizusume* A personal favourite, the ‘Sea Sparrow’ (the translation of the Japanese name) experience was both exciting and enchanting. On a calm and sunny day we found eleven of these, mostly in pairs, bobbing around on the flat ocean close to our boat, and even managed a circumnavigation of the offshore island where they nest. This is one of the world’s rarest alcids, with a decreasing world population of less than 10000 confined to a few breeding sites in central and southern Japan. It is listed as ‘Vulnerable’ by Birdlife.

Ural Owl *Strix uralensis* A good look at a roosting bird in the daytime at Karuizawa. The race here seems to be *momiyamae*, the one that occurs in central Honshu.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* Some of the race *trivirgatus* were seen on several occasions at Karuizawa, and on Kyushu we saw birds of the race *kiusuiensis*, on Hokkaido we saw some of the nominate race.

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* On Honshu several were seen in the forest at Karuizawa and also at the Snow Monkey Park, the race here is *hondoensis*. At Mi-ike on Kyushu we saw one of the race *roseilia* and on Hokkaido we had good looks at some attractive snowy-bellied birds at Tsurui that belong to the race *asiatica*.

Asian Rosy Finch *Leucosticte arctoa* A flock of thirty near Karuizawa were unexpected, and showed well as they fed around the shores of a mountain lake. The race concerned is *brunneonucha*, which breeds in eastern Siberia and the Kuril Islands.