JAPAN IN WINTER

16 FEBRUARY – 2/4 MARCH 2014

LEADER: DAVE FARROW and CHIKARA OTANI

This year’s winter tour to Japan was once again a truly wonderful trip around this enchanting country with its thrilling and spectacular avifauna. Visiting the three main islands, we began on Honshu although our tour start coincided with a record snowfall that required some rapid re-organising! Apart from this hiccup, we were soon back on track, and went on to visit the warmer climes of Kyushu, and then finally to the pack ice on snowy (yet mild) Hokkaido. Highlights included the dancing Japanese Cranes of Hokkaido and the noisy hordes of Hooded and White-naped Cranes at Arasaki. Rare waterfowl were a feature of this year’s tour, with a surprise find on our first afternoon of a drake Baer’s Pochard, a gorgeous male Scaly-sided Merganser on a suburban river that gave us a great close show, plus hundreds of Baikal Teal, a Bufflehead, a White-winged Scoter and a Swan Goose. The Eagles of the icy north are always a major thrill, with our
'nature cruise' into the pack ice bringing us eyeball-to-eyeball with scores of Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles, squabbling over the fish thrown for them while legions of large Gulls picked up the scraps. A Blakiston's Fish Owl appeared for us, eating his fish supper in a snowy streambed, and a fine Ural Owl was seen at a daytime roost. Also around Hokkaido we saw Spectacled, Pigeon and Brunnich's Guillemots, Least Auklets, Red-faced Cormorants and a couple of Sea Otter, while on Kyushu we enjoyed a mini-pelagic to see the endearing Japanese Murrelets. We saw a splendid cock Copper Pheasant, jay-walking in front of our bus, plus two male Pallas's Rosefinches, Asian Rosy Finches and a vagrant Forest Wagtail. We had a superb pelagic extension to the tour, and had a great day at sea when we saw exceptional numbers of Short-tailed Albatross, plus Laysan and Black-footed Albatross and a pod of Sperm Whale. Add to this a greatly enjoyable visit to the enchanting Snow Monkeys of Nagano, 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, however on meeting Otani-san he gave us the bad news that due to the epic snowstorm of the previous day, Karuizawa was cut off and the Army were attempting too relieve the town! That really threw a spanner in the works and we had to quickly make an alternative plan. We decided to stay close to Tokyo at a hotel in the Kasai Rinkai Koen, a waterfront park where we would be able to start our birding. Once we had reached there, by bus and train, we took a walk around the area. The sea was crowded with Great Crested Grebes and Greater Scaup, plus dense little flocks of Black-necked Grebe and a group of Common Goldeneye. Scanning a pond here that was crowded with Common Pochard we spotted an unusual individual, a drake Baer's Pochard! This was a great surprise, to find such a rare and endangered species, and this gave us a good consolation for having our program turned upside down. We also saw a Black-faced Spoonbill, Common Greenshanks and Black-winged Stilt, our first Brown-eared Bulbuls, White-cheeked Starling and Dusky Thrushes. We were also treated to a rare view of the sun slipping behind Mt Fuji, a crystal clear view 106km across Tokyo, the air scrubbed clean by yesterdays storm. The following morning we returned to the park before breakfast but could find no sign of the Baer's Pochard, but we had good views of Brown-headed Thrush, Bull-headed Shrike, Japanese White-eye, a couple of Eastern Buzzards, a glimpse of an Eastern Water Rail, and some smart Northern Pintail. We then set off on our journey once more, taking a train into Tokyo station (an experience in itself!) to take the Shinkansen Bullet train to Nagano. While large areas were crippled by the record-breaking snowfall, the Shinkansen tracks were heated, so we were able to get through by train if not by road. We sped through the snowy landscape, with some staggering accumulations of the white stuff visible along the way, houses and vehicles completely buried under a white blanket. We rolled into Nagano city in the early afternoon, and collected our vehicles for our onward journey. We drove out to our hotel near the Snow Monkey Park, making slow progress with snow banks piled high along the roadsides. Alas, we heard that the Snow Monkey Park was closed due to the snow, and with snowing lying over a metre deep it was not surprising,
We took a stroll around the environs of our hotel, seeing Dusky and Pale Thrushes, Japanese Grosbeak, and as luck would have it, a gang of eight Japanese Macaques mischievously jumping across balconies within the village itself. We then enjoyed a fine traditional Japanese dinner from our proud hostess.

After a good Japanese breakfast, we loaded up and we were waved off by our delightful hosts, and decided to give the Snow Monkey Park a try. We reached the car park without issue but found the gateway roped off with a sign saying 'today closed'. We opted to ignore this sign, to see how far we could go, which proved to be a good move as we were able to trek all the way up despite the snow, and the staff already present at the ticket office at the top were eager to take our entrance money! The hot spring pool was not functioning due to the inlet pipes being frozen up, but the hordes of Japanese Macaques thrilled as they tussled and screeched and fed on the grain handouts. We also found Japanese Varied Tit, Willow Tit, Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, a big flock of Bramblings and a single Eurasian Siskin, and the colourful *japonicus* race of Eurasian Jay. Happy not to have missed this experience after fearing we would be disappointed, we hit the highway and headed over the pass, then sped along the north coast westwards. News came through to us as we travelled that a male Scaly-sided Merganser had been seen today, on a river just close to our route, so we found the stunning sawbill fishing actively in the rapids of a broad shallow river, bathed in sunshine just metres from us. Also here were two Long-billed Plovers, Japanese Wagtails, Long-tailed Tits, more Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers, Black-faced Buntings, Dusky Thrushes, a surprise Wryneck and a fine male Japanese Green Pheasant. Moving onwards through the urban sprawl towards our destination of Kaga, we found a flock of Azure-winged Magpies at the side of a busy highway.

From our comfortable hotel in Kaga, we made an early start to an area of fields where we searched for Goose flocks. Only when we had given up and were heading away did they appear, distant and airborne, so we gave chase and found thousands of Greater White-fronted Geese dropping in to feed in the fields. Also here were our first Grey-headed Lapwings, Japanese Green Pheasant, Japanese Skylarks, and a female Merlin that perched for a while. We visited a busy pond where dozens of Falcated Ducks swam alongside many Eurasian Wigeon and a couple of duck Smew, while a young Northern Goshawk kept them on their toes. At the Kamo-ike near Kaga we ate our lunch inside the glazed observatory and out of the biting wind, and through the large windows we could view several hundred Baikal Teal, Bewick's Swans, and both Tundra and Taiga Bean Geese. Continuing on to the coast we saw Pelagic and Temminck’s Cormorants plus a trio of Black-throated Divers on the sea. We then went to meet a local contact of Otani’s, who very kindly showed us a wonderful Solitary Snipe crouched in a wet forest paddock. Then he showed us his other stakeout, where we crammed into one vehicle and drove slowly along a forest road, and didn’t have to go far before the brakes slammed on as a fantastic ginger beast was strutting across the road, a male Copper...
Pheasant! Wow you lucky people! We finished this eventful day with a stroll through the snowy woodland, and found a fine male Red flanked Bluetail and our first Japanese Green Woodpecker.

Having an extra day here, we opted to drive south to Lake Biwa. We strolled along a quiet lakeside road where we found two Japanese Serow standing on a wooded slope, one of which was a fluffy-looking youngster. We saw colourful Daurian Redstarts, Long-tailed Tits, Falcated Ducks, some lovely close Black-necked Grebes, and a Mountain Hawk Eagle perched in a distant tree. From here we moved around this vast lake to another well-equipped Observatory, where we could see a vagrant Swan Goose roosting on a small island just in front of us together with Tundra Bean Geese, and two races of Bewick's Swans - at least four of the black-billed *columbianus* here. Looking from the back of the observatory towards a distant wooded hillside, a solitary adult Steller's Sea Eagle was visible, (and also on CCTV) a regular wintering bird that returns every year. In some nearby fields we found Rustic and Black-faced Buntings, some Northern Lapwings. We visited another pond where we saw our first Mandarin Ducks tucked away under the banks, plus more handsome Baikal Teal, another Red-flanked Bluetail, and a couple of Grey-headed Lapwings.

The next morning we awoke to big fluffy snowflakes falling, however it was time to pack up and head for Komatsu airport. We flew on a small propeller driven aircraft to Fukuoka, picked up our new minibuses and headed southwards along the Kyushu expressway. We made good time, and reached Yatsushiro where the Kumagawa estuary was just at an optimum tidal state. We jumped out to study the numerous gulls and shorebirds, and a roosting flock of Vega Gulls included several *taimyrensis* Heuglin's Gulls, a single Mongolian Gull, and several Black-tailed Gulls. Some dainty Saunders's Gulls also joined in, flying up and down the mud and diving down on small crabs. We saw flocks of Kentish Plovers, Dunlin, Grey Plover, a single Black-faced Spoonbill, Ospreys, Common Shelduck, Blue Rock Thrush, Brambling, Buff-bellied Pipits, and some airborne Russet Sparrows. We continued on our way to Arasaki, arriving at dusk with enough light to see our first Hooded Cranes in the fields as we drove up to our traditional minshuku, situated right next to the Cranes favoured roost area.

Dawn saw us merging with the hordes of Cranes around our lodge, and we began our birding at a feeding point where the Cranes were frantically hoovering up the grain that had been spread for them. Among the thousands of Hooded Cranes were the statuesque White-naped Cranes, and before long we had found a couple of diminutive Sandhill Cranes, plus a Common Crane with a couple of hybrid birds in tow. We also found Temminck's Stint, Little Ringed Plover, numerous Buff-bellied Pipits and Northern Lapwings. Along the telephone wires sat hundreds of Oriental Rooks, with a few dark Daurian Jackdaws scattered among them.
At a reed bed we found a lively party of Chinese Penduline Tits, several Common Reed Buntings, a showy Japanese Bush Warbler, Pale and Dusky Thrushes, and as we drove back we spotted a stunning Ruddy-breasted Crake in a ditch that approached to within just a few metres of us, giving everyone superb close views. After some breakfast we quickly returned to the milling throng, having a great view from a rooftop overlooking the spectacle. Both Eurasian and Black-faced Spoonbills were visible, and some shiny Common Starlings especially for Otani-san. Russet Sparrows also appeared among the Tree Sparrows, and in some arable fields we found Chestnut-eared Buntings and Zitting Cisticola. In the afternoon we drove down the coast, to an area of shady forest where we crept around on forest tracks trying to glimpse elusive Grey Buntings. A White's Thrush showed briefly, and nervous swarms of Mandarin Ducks flew rapidly around a small lake.

We spent another happy morning in the cold sunshine at Arasaki, beginning with the dawn spectacle of hordes of Cranes flying against the backdrop of the rising sun and an orange sky. Also we saw Red-throated Pipits flying about uttering their thin sibilant call, and a Ruddy Shelduck flew in to join a flock of Common Shelduck. We spent another session on our favourite rooftop watching the spectacle of the Cranes, before heading out across country. Along a river running through the hills we saw a shy Crested Kingfisher briefly, then around the crater-lake at Mi-ike we saw a vagrant wintering Forest Wagtail that Otani had discovered there earlier in the winter, plus a Japanese Green Woodpecker in one of the big trees that surround the lake. Our hotel was a famous Onsen, and we were served some wonderful food while we were here.

We drove out towards the east coast of Kyushu, and explored some paddies and forest edge where in the early morning we found numerous Elegant Buntings, Chestnut-eared Buntings, Olive-backed Pipits, a flock of Brambling, and some trilling Ryukyu Minivets that showed rather well. Exploring a quiet forest road nearby we found a female Grey Bunting that showed herself briefly, before returning to the dark forest. We then sped along the coast road for our appointment with a fishing boat, and once lunch was out of the way we donned our uncomfortable yellow lifejackets. We chugged a short way out of the harbour, and quickly found several Japanese Murrelets fishing quite close to our boat, quite approachable and audibly calling as they surfaced. A few Black-tailed Gulls and Pacific Reef Egrets were also seen before we headed back into harbour, job done! We drove back southwards along the coast to the Hitotsuse estuary, where we found eight Black-faced Spoonbills, a fine Eastern Marsh Harrier, some Black-necked Grebes, Eastern Yellow Wagtail, and a gaggle of Spot-billed Duck and Mallard.
We headed back to the lakeside at Mi-ike at dawn, for a further search for Grey Bunting in the early morning gloom. Another female was glimpsed but again melted away, but an Asian Stubtail was a surprise find, even if it only seen zipping past us. We also saw a quartet of Ryukyu Minivets, some handsome Japanese Varied Tits and Eurasian Nuthatch, before it was time to leave the balmy sunshine of Kyushu, driving to Kagoshima airport and flying first to Tokyo (in a lifer airliner, a Boeing 787 ‘Dreamliner’) and then after a brief wait, onwards to Kushiro with another short flight. Arriving in snowy Hokkaido we found it to be a mild 0 degrees, as we drove the short distance to our hotel for the night.

We rose early and met the dawn on the Setsurigawa in the company of numerous photographers, all lined up and training their big lenses on the Japanese Cranes standing in the shallow river. As the light came up the birds stretched and flew off in two and threes, some Goosanders swam in the river and a Steller's Sea Eagle came and perched in the riverside trees. Nearby we found a flock of smart Common Redpolls feeding on the roadside, and then after some breakfast we returned to watch Cranes at a feeding area where they dancing and bugled on the sunlit snow, joined by dozens of Whooper Swans that were eventually chased off by a staff member! (presumably because they were eating all the Crane's food!) The feeders here provided us with some great looks at Marsh Tits, Eurasian Nuthatch of the very white-bellied *asiatica* race, and a female Hawfinch. Heading northwards across the snowy landscape, we screeched to a halt when we found
two stunning male Pallas's Rosefinches at the roadside - they stayed around just long enough for us all to enjoy their vivid colours, before they were boosted off by passing traffic. We stopped to check a Ural Owl roost where luckily a bird was in residence, allowing great looks as it sat soaking up the winter sunshine. We then reached the east coast and spent some time checking duck flocks along the Notsuke Hanto. Among the Black and Stejneger's Scoters, Otani located a drake American White-winged Scoter, close enough for us all to see his subtle identification features. Also here were Long-tailed Ducks and a few Harlequin Ducks, Common Goldeneye and Red-breasted Merganser. Checking a nearby harbour we found Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls, plus the now abundant Slaty-backed Gulls. Onwards towards our night stop, a check of Rausu Harbour revealed a drake Bufflehead, alongside drake Common Goldeneyes that were throwing their heads back in display, plus a few more Harlequin Ducks. We paused at our hotel for an early dinner before heading to our appointment with Mr Blakiston's Fish Owl, and we took up our viewing position of the snowy streambed in a kitchen building, where pungent frying and the banging of pots added a certain piquancy to the experience! After hearing the bird calling for a while, in it came, caught a fish, ate it in front of us and then flew off. Hurrah! That had been a full and exciting day!

The next morning we made our way down to the port of Rausu and boarded a boat that took us out on our cruise to the pack ice, this year just a few kilometres offshore. With a light misty fog that diffused the sunlight,
we had a fantastic spectacle for a whole two hours, with dozens of Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles sitting around on the ice or squabbling over fish, plus hundreds of Gulls (Slaty-backed, Glaucous-winged and Glaucous) squabbling over the fish being launched in their direction. With memory cards (and memories) full, we returned to port, and then returned to Notsuke Hanto, where we saw many Spectacled Guillemot on the sea, and eventually we found a lovely group of Asian Rosy Finch sitting in the sun. As we approached Nemuro we ended our day with a brief stop at a nature centre, where we had close views of Marsh Tits, Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Eurasian Nuthatch, before continuing to our hotel, the tallest building in town.

An early foray to a nearby harbour was rather quiet, with visibility much reduced due to fog, while black ice on the roads made the driving rather hairy! After breakfast we headed down to the port of Ochiishi to take another 'nature cruise', and were greeted with a presentation of token gifts, together with press photographers to record the event of us being the cruise company's 3000th customers! We headed out to sea aboard two fishing boats, and had close looks at Spectacled Guillemot and Least Auklets, a variety of plumages of Pigeon Guillemots, and for one of the boats some Ancient Murrelets. Back to land and we headed down the peninsula, picking up some lunch supplies and eating them down by another harbour where we got very close to Long-tailed Duck drakes, plus the endearing Black Scoters made their little splashing display runs while their peers cheered them on with whistling calls. We continued on to Cape Nosappu where we sheltered from the cold wind behind the lighthouse and scanned the sea. Conditions were remarkably good and we had further views of Least Auklets, a couple of Ancient Murrelets, many more Spectacled and some Pigeon Guillemots, and a distant Red-faced Cormorant could be seen feeding in a break in the pack ice that was being steadily pushed around the cape by a northerly wind, alongside the more numerous Pelagic Cormorants. At the end of the day we watched a Sea Otter relaxing on the ice, and a couple of Red-faced Cormorants that sat up on a rock.

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We made another early visit to nearby harbours, this time with better weather, and added a lone Brunnich’s Guillemot to our tally. After checking out, we made our way Cape Kiritappu on the south facing coast, where we found another Sea Otter, some Red-necked Grebes, Red-throated Divers and Harlequin Ducks, Northern Ravens flew overhead and a Peregrine perched up on a large rock. From here we drove across to another Crane Centre, where we arrived just in time for the daily feeding. We joined the massed ranks of paparazzi, and soon a staff member came out and scattered the contents of a bucket of fish on the ground, allegedly for the Japanese Cranes that stood on the snowy field expectantly, but it was the White-tailed Eagles that stole the show - along with the fish! As the Cranes pecked at the fish, several White-tailed Eagles and Black-eared Kites began circling over their heads, one by one diving into the Crane flock to steal their lunch, causing panic and mayhem as they did so. Once all the fish was gone, the Cranes, Eagles, and photographers all drifted away. This was a fitting end to our stay on Hokkaido, and from here it was a short
drive to Kushiro airport and our evening flight to Tokyo. On arrival, all 14 of us squeezed onto the hotel shuttle bus along with several other passengers, while one hard-working driver lifted all the luggage onto the bus – an estimated 400 kilos - and he wasn’t a young man either! When we arrived at our hotel we gave him a round of applause!

After a night in the comfortable hotel in Tokyo we said farewell to those not joining us for our pelagic extension, and as rain was forecast we had a leisurely start to the day. We headed across town on the train network to the urban wetland of Yatsu Higata. Here was a well-equipped and comfortable observatory, a good place to hide from the rain and study the available avifauna, which included numerous Northern Pintail, Common Kingfisher, Northern Goshawk, Grey Plover and Black-winged Stilt. After a most agreeable lunch in the cafe there, we decided to brave the elements and pay another visit to Kasai Park. On the sea we found hundreds of Black-necked Grebes that joined the thousands of Great Crested Grebes, and the Black-faced Spoonbill was still there, still asleep. The persistent rain dampened our enthusiasm, so we headed off on a warm commuter train to the port, where a Chinese meal filled our bellies before we went aboard our ship. It was a late sailing so we went straight to bed, as we headed out across Tokyo Bay towards the Izu Islands.

Dawn broke near Miyakejima, and we sailed south to Hachiojima in fine conditions. Our first Albatrosses were Black-footed, followed by Laysan, and then our first Short-tailed Albatross came shooting past the ship. The sea was covered with thousands of Streaked Shearwaters, though other tubenoses were strangely in short supply. On reaching Hachiojima we had just 15 minutes on this intriguing forest-covered island - not really enough time for an exploration of its avifauna, then we hurriedly re-boarded the ship for the return journey. Blue Rock Thrush was the only bird of note onshore, but close to another island we had a good look at a Black-legged Kittiwake plunge-diving for small fish, plus we saw Brown Boobies, and single Glaucous-winged and Glaucous Gulls among the more numerous Black-tailed and Vega Gulls. As we returned northwards from Miyakejima, our tally of all three Albatrosses was steadily rising, then in the final few hours we found a remarkable concentration of both Laysan and Short-tailed Albatrosses swarming around an area where several Sperm Whales were at the surface, taking the totals of each Albatross to 60 – 70. (actually, its fair to say we lost count!) We retreated inside as dusk fell, thrilled with a very successful days’ seawatching.

As we returned to Tokyo and went ashore, our group began to disperse, some staying on to further explore this delightful country, while many of us headed for the airport and our flights homeward. It had been a truly successful tour of the Japanese archipelago, not least in part due to the skills of organising and re-organising by Otani-san. Domo arigato gosaimas! I cant wait to return.
SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). IOC World Bird Names. This list is updated several times annually and is available at http://www.worldbirdnames.org.

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).
Species which were only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO).
Species which were not personally recorded by the leader 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 unseen from thickets in Kyushu.
Copper Pheasant ◊  Syrmaticus soemmerringii  A stunning encounter with a cock on a forest road near Komatsu.
Japanese Green Pheasant ◊  Phasianus versicolor  Good looks at cocks at Kanazawa, five hens at Biwa-ko.
Swan Goose ◊  Anser cygnoides  A vagrant at Biwa-ko, seen well but mostly asleep!
Taiga Bean Goose ◊  Anser fabalis  A good number of middendorfii at Katano Kamo-ike, also at Biwa-ko. See note.
Tundra Bean Goose ◊  Anser rossicus  A few serrirostris at Katano Kamo-ike, also at Biwa-ko. See note.
Greater White-fronted Goose  Anser albifrons  Lots in the fields near Kaga, a single on Kyushu. See note.
[Snow Goose x Greater White-fronted Goose  Anser albifrons x A. caerulescens  Two with the above near Kaga.]
Black Brant  Branta[bernicla] nigricans  Six seen off Nosappu, four off Kiritappu.
Whooper Swan  Cygnus cygnus  In good number at Tsurui and Akan, odd birds seen elsewhere.
Bewick’s Swan  Cygnus bewickii bewickii  A flock of 45+ at Katano Kamo-ike, a couple of hundred at Biwa-ko.
Tundra Swan  Cygnus bewickii columbianus  At least four of these black-billed birds at Biwa-ko.
Common Shelduck  Tadorna tadorna  Good numbers on Kyushu at Yatsushiro and Hitotsuse, also at Arasaki.
Ruddy Shelduck  Tadorna ferruginea  A single at Arasaki, a scarce visitor here.
Mandarin Duck ◊  Aix galericulata  Multiple encounters in Kyushu, big numbers at Sendai lake.
**Gadwall**  *Anas strepera*  A few encountered at several points in Honshu and Kyushu.

**Falcated Duck** ◊  *Anas falcata*  A large number near Kaga, also at Biwa-ko, plus a single on Hokkaido.

**Eurasian Wigeon**  *Anas penelope*  Numerous in many places on the tour, especially in Kyushu.

**Eurasian Wigeon x American Wigeon**  *Anas penelope x A. americana*  A couple of hybrids near Kaga.

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**Mallard**  *Anas platyrhynchos*  Frequently encountered, but few on Hokkaido.

**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, most numerous at Biwa-ko and Yatsu Higata.

**Baikal Teal** ◊  *Anas formosa*  A welcome flock of 600 of these lovely ducks at Katano Kamo-ike. See note.

**Eurasian Teal**  *Anas crecca*  Numerous on the many duck ponds and wetlands of Honshu and Kyushu.

**Common Pochard**  *Aythya ferina*  Regularly seen in small numbers, a large number at Kasai Park.

**Baer’s Pochard**  *Aythya baeri*  A drake at Kasai Park on our first afternoon was a HUGE find. See note.

**Tufted Duck**  *Aythya fuligula*  Small numbers seen at several locations, on all three islands.

**Greater Scaup**  *Aythya marila*  Many off the coast at Kasai Park, also frequently encountered on Hokkaido.

**Harlequin Duck** ◊  *Histrionicus histrionicus*  Good numbers around Hokkaido coasts, especially the Nemuro area.

**Stejneger’s Scoter** ◊  *Melanitta stejnegeri*  Regularly seen around the coasts of Hokkaido, many at Notsuke.

**White-winged Scoter**  *Melanitta deglandi*  An excellent find by Otani at Notsuke. See note.

**Black Scoter** ◊  *Melanitta americana*  Abundant around the coasts of Hokkaido, and pleasingly vocal! See note.

**Long-tailed Duck**  *Clangula hyemalis*  Good numbers of birds around Hokkaido, with close views of gorgeous males.

**Bufflehead**  *Bucephala albeola*  A nice drake at Rausu, a scarce winter visitor from North America.
Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* Rather numerous around the coasts of Hokkaido, also at Kasai Park.

Smew *Mergellus albellus* A few around Kaga including a drake at Katano Kamo-iike, plus a female at Biwa-ko.

Goosander *Mergus merganser* Regularly seen on Hokkaido, also at Kanazawa and Biwa-ko.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* Good numbers around the Hokkaido coast, also seen at Yatsushiro.

Scaly-sided Merganser *Mergus squamatus* A superb male seen on the river at Kanazawa. See note.

Red-throated Diver *Gavia stellata* Singles off Kaga, also at Hansaki and Kiritappu.

Black-throated Diver *Gavia arctica* Three seen, on the sea near Kaga.

Laysan Albatross *Phoebastria immutabilis* Good numbers, at least 60+ seen on our pelagic extension in Tokyo Bay.

Black-footed Albatross *Phoebastria nigripennis* The least numerous Albatross with 30+ seen on our pelagic extension.

**Short-tailed Albatross** *Phoebastria albatrus* Outstanding numbers seen on our pelagic extension. See note.

**Streaked Shearwater** *Calonectris leucomelas* Thousands seen on our pelagic extension!

**Fork-tailed Storm-petrel** *Oceanodroma furcata* (NL) Two on our on our pelagic extension.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* Not uncommon along our route, except on Hokkaido.

**Red-necked Grebe** *Podiceps grisegena* One off Kaga, a couple off Nosappu, several at Kiritappu.

**Great Crested Grebe** *Podiceps cristatus* Thousands on the sea off Kasai Park was notable, a few at Biwa-ko.

**Slavonian Grebe** *Podiceps auritus* A single in Ochishi harbour.

**Black-necked Grebe** *Podiceps nigricollis* A few around Kyushu and Honshu, hundreds on the sea at Kasai Park.

**Eurasian Spoonbill** *Platalea leucorodia* A single with the following at Arasaki.

**Black-faced Spoonbill** *Platalea minor* A total of 14 seen. See note.

**Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea* Not uncommon.

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

**Little Egret** *Egretta garzetta* A good number at Arasaki, also around the platforms at Kadogawa.

**Pacific Reef Egret** *Egretta sacra* Two dark morph examples at Kadogawa.

**Brown Booby** *Sula leucogaster* At least three birds seen on our pelagic extension.

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

**Temminck’s Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax capillatus* A group seen on rocks near Kaga, also on our extension.

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

**Red-faced Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax urile* Two or three yellow-billed birds found at Cape Nosappu.

**Eurasian Kestrel** (Common K) *Falco tinnunculus* A few sightings along our route.

**Merlin** *Falco columbarius* A female seen in fields near Kaga.

**Peregrine Falcon** *Falco peregrinus* Six birds seen, all but one on Honshu.

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

**Black-eared Kite** *Milvus lineatus* Seen throughout, most numerous on Kyushu, and often 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* A single at Biwa-ko, 100+ seen on our cruise at Rausu. See note

**Eastern Marsh Harrier** *Circus spilonotus* Singles seen at Biwa-ko and Hitotsuse Estuary.
Eurasian Sparrowhawk  *Accipiter nisus*  A small number seen along our route.
Northern Goshawk  *Accipiter gentilis*  A few seen in the Tokyo area, also at Kaga and Arasaki.
Eastern Buzzard ◊ (Japanese B)  *Buteo japonicus*  Scattered sightings on Honshu and Kyushu, one at Kiritappu.
Mountain Hawk Eagle  *Nisaetus nipalensis*  A perched bird at great range at Biwa-ko.
Eastern Water Rail  *Rallus indicus*  A brief view of one at Kasai Park.
Ruddy-breasted Crane  *Porzana fusca*  Stunning views of one in a ditch at Arasaki.

Common Moorhen  *Gallinula chloropus*  A few scattered sightings.
Common Coot  *Fulica atra*  Fairly common in suitable habitat, absent from Hokkaido.
Sandhill Crane  *Grus canadensis*  At least three of these diminutive fellows 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 couple at Arasaki, along with some odd-looking presumed hybrids.
Hooded Crane  *Grus monacha*  With 10,000 birds reportedly present at Arasaki, they kept us entertained. See note.
Red-crowned Crane ◊ (Japanese C)  *Grus japonensis*  The most beautiful of all, a highlight of the tour. See note.
Black-winged Stilt  *Himantopus himantopus*  A single at Kasai, four at Yatsu Higata.
Northern Lapwing  *Vanellus vanellus*  In good numbers at Arasaki, as many as 45 in one flock. Also at Biwa-ko
Grey-headed Lapwing  *Vanellus cinereus*  Three near Kaga, two more near Biwa-ko.
Grey Plover  *Pluvialis squatarola*  Numerous at Yatsushiro, some more at Yatsu Higata in Tokyo.
Long-billed Plover ◊  *Charadrius placidus*  Two seen on the river at Kanazawa were well received
Little Ringed Plover  *Charadrius dubius*  A couple of singles at Arasaki.
Kentish Plover  *Charadrius alexandrinus*  Some vocal flocks flying around and feeding on the mud at Yatsushiro.
Solitary Snipe  *Gallinago solitaria*  A nice surprise to see one of these near Komatsu, thanks to Otani’s local contact.
Common Snipe  *Gallinago gallinago*  A small number at Arasaki.
Eurasian Curlew  *Numenius arquata*  Seen at Kasai Park, Yatsushiro and Hitotsuse.
Common Greenshank  *Tringa nebularia*  A few at Kasai Park and Yatsushiro.
Green Sandpiper  *Tringa ochropus*  A couple in ditches at Arasaki.
Common Sandpiper  *Actitis hypoleucos*  Odd ones seen along our route.
Temminck’s Stint  *Calidris temminckii*  Three in a wet field at Arasaki.
Dunlin  *Calidris alpina*  A good number at Yatsushiro, also seen at Arasaki, Hanasaki, Kiritappu and Yatsu Higata.
Black-tailed Gull ◊  *Larus crassirostris*  A few on Kyushu, singles on Hokkaido, many on our pelagic extension.
Kamchatka Gull ◊  *Larus kamtschatschensis*  Most numerous on Hokkaido with quite a few around the harbours.
Glaucous-winged Gull ◊  *Larus glaucescens*  Only seen on Hokkaido, many around the coasts there.
Glaucous Gull  *Larus hyperboreus*  Seen in good numbers around the Hokkaido coasts, mostly immatures.
Vega Gull   \textit{Larus vegae}  \textit{\textcopyright} Seen on the coasts of Honshu and Kyushu.

Mongolian Gull  \textit{Larus mongolicus}  \textit{\textcopyright} At least one immature roosting on the mud at Yatsushiro.

Slaty-backed Gull  \textit{Larus schistisagus}  \textit{\textcopyright} Very common on Hokkaido.

Heuglin's Gull   \textit{Larus heuglini}  \textit{\textcopyright} A handful of \textit{taimyrensis} birds with yellow legs seen at Yatsushiro. See note.

Black-headed Gull  \textit{Chroicocephalus ridibundus}  \textit{\textcopyright} Seen in numbers at Kasai Park, Yatsushiro and Yatsu Higata.

Saunders’s Gull \textit{Saundersilarus saundersi}  \textit{\textcopyright} Great close views of feeding birds at Yatsushiro. See note.

Black-legged Kittiwake  \textit{Rissa tridactyla}  \textit{\textcopyright} Two seen on our pelagic extension, one at Mikurajima showed well.

Brunnich's Gull  \textit{Larus heuglini}  \textit{\textcopyright} A handful of \textit{taimyrensis} birds with yellow legs seen at Yatsushiro. See note.

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Common Gull  \textit{Chroicocephalus ridibundus}  \textit{\textcopyright} Seen in numbers at Kasai Park, Yatsushiro and Yatsu Higata.
Eurasian Jay  *Garrulus glandarius*  Nice looks at several at the Snow Monkey Park, a single on Hokkaido. See note.

Azure-winged Magpie  *Cyanopica cyanus*  A flock seen along a busy road near Komatsu was the only sighting.

Daurian Jackdaw  *Coloeus dauuricus*  At least 25 at Arasaki, although no ‘pied’ adult birds were seen.

Oriental Rook  *Corvus pastinator*  Good numbers at Arasaki, also seen near Kaga.

Oriental Crow  *Corvus orientalis*  Common throughout, and often along the shorelines.

Large-billed Crow  *Corvus japonensis*  Common throughout, and often more numerous (and vocal) than the above.

Northern Raven  *Corvus corax*  Four seen at Kiritappu, another two en route near there.

Eastern Great Tit  *Parus minor*  Regularly encountered on Honshu and Kyushu.

Coal Tit  *Periparus ater*  A few seen at the Snow Monkey Park, also a single at feeders on Hokkaido.

Japanese Varied Tit  *Poecile varius*  Seen at the Snow Monkey Park, best views were at Mi-ike.

Marsh Tit  *Poecile palustris*  Several seen well on Hokkaido, often at feeders.

Willow Tit  *Poecile montanus*  A couple seen in the woods at the Snow Monkey Park.

Chinese Penduline Tit  *Remiz consobrinus*  A great encounter with six or more birds in an Arasaki reedbed.

Barn Swallow  *Hirundo rustica*  Numerous birds seen at several sites on the eastern side of Kyushu.

Asian House Martin  *Delichon dasypus*  A flock seen over a village en-route to Arasaki.

Long-tailed Tit  *Aegithalos caudatus*  Seen on all three islands. See note.

Japanese Skylark  *Alauda japonica*  In good number in fields at Kaga and Arasaki.

Zitting Cisticola  *Cisticola juncidis*  A couple at Arasaki.

Brown-eared Bulbul  *Hypsipetes amaurotis*  Seen regularly throughout Honshu and Kyushu, a couple on Hokkaido.

Asian Stubtail  *Urosphena squameiceps*  A songster appeared briefly at Mi-ike, not that I could hear it!
Japanese Bush Warbler ◊ *Cettia diphone* Several good sightings of this demure fellow, best of all on Kyushu.

Red-billed Leiothrix *Leiothrix lutea* A small flock seen at Kogawa, also heard at Miike. An introduced species.

Japanese White-eye ◊ *Zosterops japonicus* Numerous sightings on Honshu and Kyushu.

Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* A single near Komatsu, a couple more at Miike.

Eurasian Nuthatch ◊ *Sitta europaea* A couple at Miike, several more on Hokkaido that showed very well. See note.

White-cheeked Starling ◊ *Sturnus cinereus* Regularly seen on Honshu and Kyushu, often in good numbers.

Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* A scarce bird in Japan, ten birds at Arasaki were notable.

White’s Thrush ◊ *Zoothera aurea* A brief glimpse of one at Sendai, although some saw it well later on.

Pale Thrush ◊ *Turdus pallidus* Fairly common in the woods on Kyushu, with a few seen on Honshu.

Brown-headed Thrush ◊ *Turdus chrysolaus* Three seen in Kasai Park.

Dusky Thrush *Turdus eunomus* Seen on all three islands, though less commonly on Hokkaido.

Red-flanked Bluetail *Tarsiger cyanura* A nice male near Komatsu, females at Biwa-ko and Miike.

Daurian Redstart ◊ *Phoenicurus auroreus* A few seen around Biwa-ko, then fairly frequently on Kyushu. Lovely.

Blue Rock-Thrush *Monticola solitarius* At Yatsushiro, Arasaki, and on Hachiojima, all of the philippensis race.

Brown Dipper *Cinclua pallasii* Singles seen at the Snow Monkey Park and at Kanazawa.

Russet Sparrow *Passer rutilans* Good looks at Arasaki, a few glimpsed at Yatsushiro.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* Seen throughout.

Forest Wagtail *Dendronanthus indicus* A vagrant that Otani had found early in the winter, still present at Mikes.

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

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* Several seen on Kyushu, a single near Biwa-ko.

Black-backed Wagtail ◊ *Motacilla lugens* Seen rather commonly on Honshu and Kyushu.

Japanese Wagtail ◊ *Motacilla grandis* Not common, seen at Kanazawa and Kaga, and at Setsurigawa on Hokkaido.

Olive-backed Pipit ◊ *Anthus hodgsoni* Four seen at Koda-ko.

Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus* At least five seen flying about at Arasaki.

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

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla* Big flocks at the Snow Monkey Park and at Koda; smaller numbers elsewhere.

Oriental Greenfinch (Grey-capped G) *Carduelis sinica* Numerous on Kyushu, smaller numbers elsewhere.
Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica* Small flocks seen at Kaga and Biwa-ko.
Elegant Bunting *Emberiza elegans* A good number showed well to us at Koda.
Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala* A few at Biwa-ko, then more widely available on Kyushu.
Grey Bunting *Emberiza variabilis* Very elusive singles at Sendai and Kota Shrine showed little of themselves.
Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* Seen at Kasai Park, Arasaki and Hitotsuse.

**MAMMALS**

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* Some nice examples on Hokkaido, with very thick fur!
Largha Seal *Phoca largha* (NL) One seen in Rausu harbour.
Harbour Seal (Common Seal) *Phoca vitulina* A couple seen on Hokkaido.
Sea Otter *Enhydra lutris* It was exciting to see one at Nosappu, then another at Kiritappu.
Siberian Weasel *Mustela sibirica* One seen at Sendai on Kyushu, one roadkill at Mi-ike.
Japanese Macaque *Macaca fuscata* Some 150 seen at ‘Snow Monkey Park’, also on the road near Kagoshima!
Great Sperm Whale *Physeter catodon* Several animals blowing on our pelagic extension, three or more seen.
Sika Deer *Cervus nippon* Common at Notsuke on Hokkaido, often seen lurking by the road elsewhere.
Japanese Serow *Capricornis crispus* A juvenile and an adult standing on lakeside slopes at Biwa-ko.
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 (Eds). 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 and from the observatory at Biwa-ko were of the *middendorfii* 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, though were definitely in the minority, and mostly asleep! However, comparisons in the structural differences between the two were possible, with these showing shorter and stockier necks, stubbier bills and more rounded heads than the above

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

Baikal Teal  *Anas formosa*
A swarm of 600 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!

Baer’s Pochard  *Aythya baeri*
Birdlife estimates just 150 – 700 left, gone from most of its breeding and wintering range. A drake was found at Kasai Park on our first afternoon, where we unexpectedly found ourselves after the epic snowstorm that had swamped the country made us do a quick revision of the itinerary. Well spotted, Bernard!

American White-winged Scoter  *Melanitta deglandi*
Otani showed his excellent ID skills at Notsuke, finding a male on the sea after only being out of the bus for about 30 seconds! Subtle differences between this and Stejneger’s Scoter are the brown flanks, lack of ‘bill hump’ and different bill colouration, lacking yellow and having a dark mark on the side of the bill. It is unclear how rare this is here, as many must go undetected! A ‘write-in’ for the tour list.

Black Scoter  *Melanitta americana*
While I didn’t make any recordings of their wonderful calls on this trip, you can listen to a recording from a previous tour here: http://shortwing.co.uk/services/bird-sounds/ - or at http://www.xeno-canto.org/86028

Scaly-sided Merganser  *Mergus squamatus*
A superb male seen on the river at Kanazawa, actively feeding just a few metres from us in a shallow and fast river in the middle of the town. Probably our ‘bird-of-the-trip’! 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.

Short-tailed Albatross  *Phoebastria albatrus*
Outstanding numbers seen on our pelagic extension, with an estimated 60 –70 birds of all ages. This species is listed by Birdlife as Vulnerable. It still has a very small breeding range, and at the end of the 2006-2007 breeding season, the global population was estimated to be 2,364 individuals, with 1,922 birds on Torishima and 442 birds on Minami-kojima (Senkaku Islands). You can read more at http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/

Black-faced Spoonbill  *Platalea minor*
One at Kasai Park, one at Yatsushiro, three at Arasaki, nine 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 was 2693 birds, with an estimated 1600 being adults, which means 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, with the ‘Nature Cruise’ into the pack-ice one of the biggest highlights of the trip. 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.

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, 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 10,000 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. 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. We enjoyed our first at dawn in the Setsurigawa River roost, then we watched them near Tsurui and finally getting mugged by Eagles at Akan, showing their full range of dancing, prancing and bugling on the sparkling snow. 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*
Five or so, seen with the gull flock at Yatsushiro, these yellowish-legged birds are referable to the *taimyrensis* form. This is a gull with confusing and complex taxonomy! These paler-backed *taimyrensis* birds are from the population lying between the nominate *heuglini* and Vega Gull, and are considered by some as intergrades, originating from a ‘hybrid swarm’.

Saunders’s Gull  *Saundersilarus saundersi*
Good views of up to 10+ 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’.

Pigeon Guillemot  *Cepphus columba*
The very pale birds are the typical *columba* race, however there seems to be some confusion about the darker *snowi* race from the Kurils. Several birds seen around the Hokkaido coasts would appear to be these darker forms of Pigeon Guillemot, but data seems rather scarce on the plumages of this taxon.

Japanese Murrelet  *Synthliboramphus wumizusume*
A personal favourite, the ‘Sea Sparrow’ (the translation of the Japanese name) experience was as always both exciting and enchanting. On a calm sunny afternoon we found seven or more of these, mostly in pairs, bobbing around close to our boat and also calling. 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 on Hokkaido. This obviously pale bird is of the *japonica* race, darker subspecies occur on Honshu and Kyushu though.

Eurasian Jay  *Garrulus glandarius*
At the Snow Monkey Park we saw the race *japonicus*, a single on Hokkaido was of the race *brandtii*.

Long-tailed Tit  *Aegithalos caudatus*
On Honshu the race concerned is *trivirgatus*, on Kyushu we saw birds of the race *kiusiuensis*, on Hokkaido one of the nominate race was seen.

Eurasian Nuthatch  *Sitta europaea*
At Mi-iike on Kyushu we saw a couple of the race *roseilia*, and on Hokkaido we had good looks at the attractive snowy-bellied birds that belong to the race *asiatica*.

Asian Rosy Finch  *Leucosticte arctoa*
A flock of eleven birds seen feeding by the road along the Notsuke Hanto were welcome, in a winter where they were reportedly scarce throughout. The race concerned is *brunneonucha*, which breeds in eastern Siberia and the Kuril Islands.
White-tailed Eagle