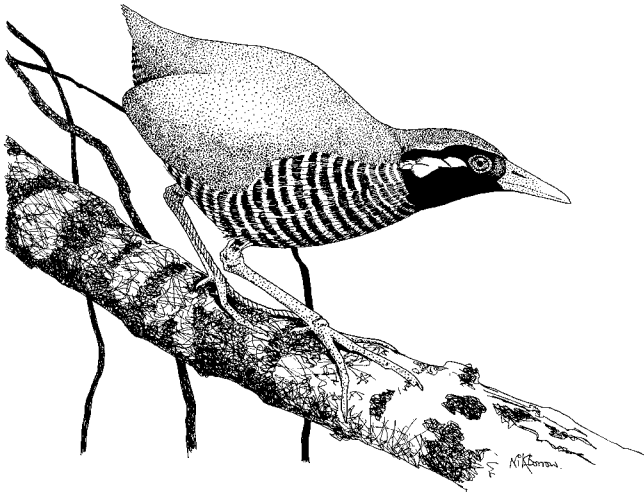


# JAPAN

**Friday 20th May – Sunday 5th June 2011 (17 days)**  
**Hokkaido Post-Tour Extension to Friday 10th June (5 days)**  
**Leaders: Pete Morris and Chikara Otani**  
**Group Size Limit: 12**  
**Tour Category: Easy to Moderate**



*Okinawa Rail (Nik Borrow)*

At the opposite end of the vast continent of Eurasia from the British Isles lies another archipelago – the islands of Japan. Westernized and yet profoundly Oriental, Japan remains an enigmatic land to westerners, few of whom know much about it beyond its shiny consumer exports.

Stretching from the subtropics in the Ryukyus to the cool temperate latitudes in Hokkaido, these beautiful islands with their jagged and broken coastlines possess some of the most striking scenery in East Asia. We are used to thinking of Japan as densely populated, but this is true only of the coastal lowlands. Over four fifths of the land surface is hilly or mountainous and there is a much greater percentage of forest cover than in western Europe. To this day, away from the large cities, Japan remains an essentially rural country, despite the population of 120 million. Nowhere in Japan is far from the sea and this has an immeasurable influence on the landscape and the people.

Japan's avifauna shows a number of parallels with that of the British Isles, not least the great number of vagrants which each attracts. However, due to its greater distance from the mainland, its many islands and its wider range of climatic conditions, it has a richer avifauna and, in particular, a considerable number of fascinating endemic and near-endemic species ranging from the beautiful Japanese Robin to the relatively recently-discovered Okinawa Rail. It is these endemics which appeal most to the visitor and this tour is specifically designed to find as many of them as possible. Our travels will also show us many other exciting East Asian birds ranging from the stunning Fairy Pitta to the secretive Malayan Night Heron. This unusual tour provides a unique opportunity to see the best that Japan has to offer in late spring and early summer and is an essential trip for anyone seriously interested in Palearctic birds.

A visit to upcountry Japan (the 'real' Japan) is an

experience in itself and one that requires of the traveller a spirit of adventure and a willingness to adapt to new ways of doing things. Simple things like eating Japanese food, sleeping on futons and bathing in an 'ofuro' are very different from back home, but will be great fun if you are tolerant of cultural differences. The difficulty of travelling around in a country where few people speak a foreign language of any kind is the main reason why only a few non-Japanese birdwatchers have explored the islands. A superb travel infrastructure, mostly comfortable accommodations, interesting food and friendly, helpful people make travelling through Japan a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

We will begin our adventure on the main island of Honshu where we will first explore the lakes and marshes of the Pacific coastal lowlands in search of the uncommon Japanese Marsh Warbler and attractive Japanese Reed Bunting. Leaving the sprawling metropolis of Tokyo behind, we will then travel into the scenic forested mountains of the central part of the island, looking for a suite of breeding passerines including the localized Japanese Yellow Bunting and Japanese Thrush before turning our attentions to famous Mount Fuji. We will search the slopes of the perfectly shaped volcano for another of Japan's specialities, Japanese Accentor.

The next leg of our journey will see us travelling southwards to the Izu Islands, in search of its island endemics, which include Izu Islands Thrush and Ijima's Leaf Warbler. We will then travel back to Tokyo by ferry, hoping to see Tristram's Storm-Petrel among the thousands of Streaked Shearwaters and other seabirds during the exciting voyage.

After that we will explore the warm temperate woodlands of southern Kyushu where we will hunt

for the stunning Fairy Pitta and White-bellied (or Japanese Green) Pigeon amongst an excellent supporting cast of forest species. We then fly southwards along the chain of the Ryukyu Islands, visiting Amami-Oshima, Okinawa and Ishigaki-jima. On these verdant islands we will search for enigmatic endemics such as Ryukyu Serpent Eagle, the amazing Okinawa Rail, the secretive Amami Woodcock, Ryukyu Robin, Ishigaki Tit and the beautiful Lidth's Jay, as well as other interesting species including Malayan Night Heron.

During the optional extension we will visit the northern Island of Hokkaido. On this dramatically scenic island we will seek out a selection of northern breeders including Hazel Grouse, Black Woodpecker, the spectacular Siberian Rubythroat, Lanceolated, Middendorff's and Gray's Grasshopper Warblers, and Yellow-breasted Bunting, as well as breeding Red-crowned Cranes and the world's largest owl, the huge Blakiston's Fish Owl.

Birdquest has operated tours to Japan since 1987.





*White's Thrush (Craig Robson)*

## Itinerary

**Day 1** The tour begins this afternoon at Narita Airport near Tokyo, where we will stay overnight.

**Day 2** In spite of its proximity to the city, much of the region to the north of Tokyo retains a rural, market-garden atmosphere thanks to an abundance of level land, good soil and a mild climate. The lakes and marshes of the area are of particular interest to birdwatchers and we shall spend this morning at two wetlands with extensive reed beds. The main species we hope to find is the very uncommon and localized Japanese Marsh Warbler, here at one of its few known breeding grounds. At this time of year they are usually relatively easy to see as they songflight from the tops of the reeds. Also present will be Japanese Reed Buntings in their neat black-headed breeding plumage, while other species we should encounter include Little Grebe, Great Cormorant, Yellow Bittern, Great Egret, Grey Heron, Black-eared Kite (split from Black), Eurasian Coot, Common Snipe, Oriental Turtle Dove, Barn Swallow, Oriental Reed and Black-browed Reed Warblers, the smart Bull-headed Shrike, White-cheeked Starling, Grey-capped Greenfinch and Eurasian Tree Sparrow. With

a bit of luck we will also see Great Bittern. Later we will drive westwards, crossing Tokyo, and then continue on into the mountains to Karuizawa for a two nights stay. Later today we will begin our exploration of this superb locality by visiting an area of abandoned paddyfields and farmland. Here our prime target will be Latham's Snipe and we should be able to watch them engaging in their incredible aerial display flights. Other species here will likely include the very distinctive and colourful endemic Green Pheasant (split from Common), Japanese Skylark (split from Eurasian), the near-endemic Brown-eared Bulbul, Siberian Stonechat, Asian Azure-winged Magpie, Oriental Crow (split from Carrion), Large-billed Crow, the colourful Chestnut-cheeked Starling and Chestnut-eared Bunting.

**Day 3** Karuizawa is situated in the mountains of central Honshu to the west of the capital and this attractive region of rugged peaks and forested valleys is excellent for birding. At this season summer visitors will have swelled the ranks of the resident birds. We will spend much of our time in the forest where our main quest will be the rare and elusive Japanese Yellow Bunting. Whilst looking for the

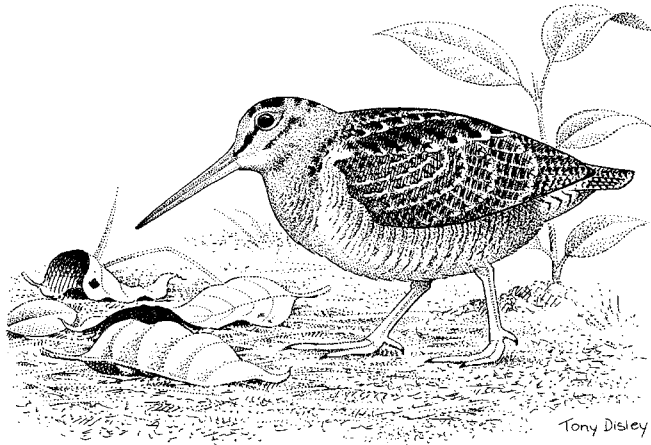
bunting we should encounter many other species including Japanese Buzzard (split from Common), Common and Lesser Cuckoos, Fork-tailed (or Pacific) Swift, the endemic Japanese Green Woodpecker, the diminutive, restricted-range Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Asian House Martin (feeding over the hotel), Grey and Japanese Wagtails (the latter is a breeding endemic, though it occurs in the Korean peninsula in the non-breeding season), Ashy Minivet, Brown Dipper, the attractive Siberian Blue Robin, Japanese and Brown-headed Thrushes, Asian Brown Flycatcher, gorgeous Narcissus and Blue-and-white Flycatchers, Winter Wren, Long-tailed, Willow, Japanese (split from Great) and Coal Tits, the beautiful Varied Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Treecreeper, Japanese White-eye, Eurasian Jay, the amazing Japanese Grosbeak and Meadow Bunting. With luck we will encounter one or two of the more elusive species, such as the secretive Copper Pheasant or Ural Owl.

**Day 4** After some final birding in the Karuizawa region we will drive south to Gotemba for an overnight stay. In the late afternoon we will have our first opportunity to explore the bird-rich forests on the northern flanks of Mount Fuji.

**Day 5** Gotemba lies beneath imposing Mount Fuji, Japan's highest volcano (3776m) and one of the world's most famous and spectacular mountains. Its perfect snow-capped cone is a fantastic backdrop on a clear day, and even at this time of year there are occasionally fresh falls of snow on the peak! We shall explore the northern and eastern slopes of Mount Fuji itself as far as the

treeline scrub, as well as the extensive areas of coniferous and deciduous forest and attractive mountain lakes that all help make this one of Japan's most scenically outstanding regions. Prime target here will be the rather Dunnock-like Japanese Accentor, but we should also find a number of other new species such as Oriental Cuckoo, the superb Northern Hawk-Cuckoo (split from Hodgson's), Black-backed Wagtail, Olive-backed Pipit, Northern Red-flanked Bluetail, the elusive Siberian Thrush, Eastern Crowned and Arctic Warblers, Goldcrest, the elusive Grey-bellied Bullfinch (formerly lumped in Eurasian) and Black-faced Bunting (of the yellow-bellied subspecies *personata*). Later we will travel back to Tokyo and catch an overnight ferry bound for Miyake-jima, one of the Seven Islands of Izu that lie to the south of Tokyo.

**Day 6** As we approach Miyake-jima we will see our first Black-tailed Gulls. Miyake-jima suffered from some serious volcanic eruptions in 2000 and as a result was closed to visitors for several years. Much of the forest on the island was destroyed, but fortunately some protected areas survived and here it is easy to find the Izu specialities. During our visit we will explore the rocky coastline, grassy headlands and remaining forests. There is a wide variety of birdlife, including a number of specialities. The endemic Izu Islands Thrush is common, as is Ijima's Leaf Warbler. This latter species is restricted to the Izu islands as a breeding species and has hardly ever been recorded in the winter months, although it is suspected that it winters in the northern Philippines. Miyake-jima is also a reliable location for the localized Styan's Grasshopper Warbler, a small-island specialist that favours dense herbage



*Amami Woodcock (Tony Disley)*

close to the coastline. Other species we hope to find include Black-crowned Night Heron, the extremely localized Japanese Woodpigeon, Japanese Bush Warbler (known as 'the Japanese nightingale' due to its rich song) and the highly distinctive endemic Izu form of the Varied Tit (which is unusually large and has chestnut cheeks, so must be a candidate for a split!). We will also have another chance to find the elusive Japanese Robin. The 'weep and sweep' of the Chinese Bamboo Partridge is a familiar sound on the island and we should bump into a few of these introduced gamebirds along the road verges, and with luck we will find White's Thrush (split from Scaly) in the same way!

**Day 7** After some final birding on Miyake-jima we will take the ferry back to Tokyo for an overnight stay. At times during the voyage we will be surrounded by seabirds, including many thousands of Streaked Shearwaters, and we will search diligently for other species which may well include the large Tristram's Storm-Petrel, Sooty and Short-tailed Shearwaters and, if we are very lucky, the elusive and little-known Japanese Murrelet. On the run up to Tokyo Bay we may

well see one or two species that prefer colder water such as Northern Fulmar or even Black-footed or Laysan Albatrosses.

**Day 8** This morning we will fly to Kagoshima, at the southern end of Kyushu (the southernmost of the main islands), and make the short drive to Mi-ike in Miyazaki Prefecture for a two nights stay. Later we will begin our exploration of the area.

**Day 9** The attractive crater lake of Mi-ike forms part of the Kirishima-Yaku National Park. Situated in the heart of an intensely volcanic area, the surroundings of the near circular Mi-ike lake are still cloaked in lush lowland broadleaf evergreen forest mixed with cedars and cypresses. Our primary objective here will be to find the lovely Fairy Pitta (known as the 'eight colour bird' in Japanese), which should be calling frequently at this season. This gem of a bird has a very localized distribution and this is one of the best places in the world to find it. Other birds of interest that we will be on the lookout for as we walk along the forest tracks include White-bellied (or Japanese) Green Pigeon, Ruddy Kingfisher (the subspecies here is bright chestnut), White-backed

Woodpecker, the seemingly tailless Asian Stubtail Warbler and the spectacular Japanese Paradise Flycatcher. Grey-faced Buzzards may put in an appearance over the canopy and we will have another chance to catch sight of one of Japan's most spectacular endemic species, the magnificent Copper Pheasant. However, the pheasant is still widely hunted in Japan and is consequently very shy and difficult to see in the dense forests, although we may well here its wing-drumming display.

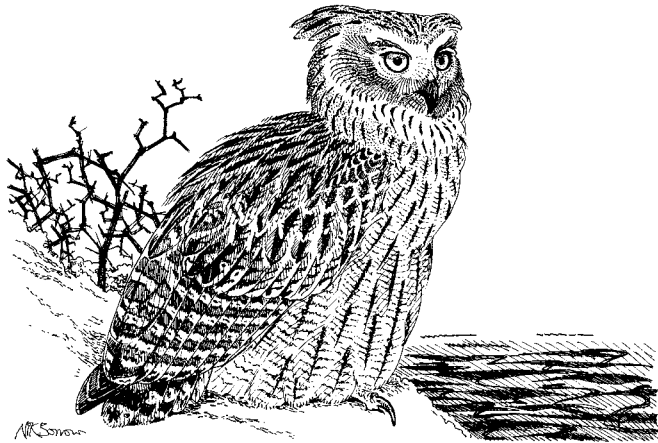
**Day 10** After some final birding at Mi-ike we will take an afternoon flight to Amami-Oshima (in the middle of the Ryukyu chain). We will be staying in the principal town, Naze, for two nights. Tonight will be our first opportunity to search for the endemic Amami Woodcock. After dinner we will drive along some of the many forestry roads. With a bit of luck we should find the woodcock and we may also see the rare and declining Amami Black Rabbit, a relict forest rabbit found only on this one island.

**Day 11** Amami-Oshima is the greenest and most rural of the Ryukyus and possesses very attractive coastal scenery with rocky headlands alternating with small sandy bays. Along the shoreline and rivers we may see Common Kingfisher and Striated (or Little) Heron, though we shall devote most of our time to searching the lush subtropical evergreen forests where the bird we will be most keen to find is the cobalt blue and cocoa-coloured endemic Lidth's Jay. We will also be looking out for the distinctive, very dark, endemic race of the White-backed Woodpecker, the endemic Amami form of the Ryukyu Robin (with black streaking on the flanks) and the endemic Ryukyu Flycatcher (which is resident

and differs from *Narcissus* Flycatcher further north both in plumage and song, so is surely a good split?!). If we are fortunate we will also see the secretive endemic Amami Thrush, which until recently was lumped in the closely related Scaly Thrush. As the population of this secretive bird numbers only 100 or so individuals, finding one is none too easy.

**Day 12** After a final morning on Amami-Oshima we will catch a flight to Kagoshima and then take a flight to Naha on Okinawa where we connect with a flight to Ishigaki-jima, one of the most southerly of the Ryukyu Islands that stretch from the main islands of Japan to Taiwan, for a two nights stay. Later we will begin our exploration of this fascinating subtropical island.

**Day 13** As well as holding a single endemic, this fascinating island is also home to some interesting endemic subspecies, as well as a few species which are difficult to find elsewhere. Being situated so close to Taiwan, there are even some species that just creep into Japan at this point. Of prime interest to us will be the Ryukyu Serpent Eagle, which is endemic to the southern Ryukyus and which was formerly treated as a race of Crested Serpent Eagle, and the endemic Ishigaki Tit (probably a good split from Japanese, this form is very dark and shows reduced white on the cheeks). We will also have a fair chance of tracking down one of Asia's more secretive and difficult species, the stunning Malayan Night Heron. Whilst exploring Ishigaki-jima we should also encounter a number of other species including Cinnamon Bittern, Eastern Cattle Egret (split from Western), Pacific Reef, Little, and Intermediate Egrets, and possibly even the globally-threatened Chinese Egret, Purple



*Blakiston's Fish Owl (Nik Borrow)*

Heron, Chinese Spot-billed Duck, Common Moorhen, White-breasted Waterhen, Kentish and Mongolian Plovers, Red-necked Stint, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Common Greenshank, Grey-tailed Tattler, Terek Sandpiper, Eurasian Whimbrel, Greater Crested and Little Terns, Emerald Dove, the stunning Ruddy Kingfisher (the subspecies here has a beautiful lilac hue to the upperparts), Pacific Swallow, Chinese (or Light-vented) Bulbul, the endemic Ryukyu Minivet (split from Ashy), Blue Rock Thrush (here of the red-bellied form *philippensis*), Zitting Cisticola and Large-billed Crow (here of the tiny subspecies *oatesi* and another candidate for a split). We may also see one or two of the scarcer species that are to be found on the island, such as Watercock, Slaty-legged Crake or Oriental Pratincole. The mellow hoots of the endemic Ryukyu Scops Owl are amongst the commonest night sounds here – the others being the sounds of frogs, several of which are endemic to the island – and we should see this lovely species as well as the more menacing-looking Northern Boobook (split from Brown).

**Day 14** After a final morning on Ishigaki-jima we will take an early afternoon flight to Okinawa, the largest of the Ryukyus. From the airport we will drive almost the whole length of the island to the Yamburu region for a two nights stay. After dark we will begin searching for one of Japan's most spectacular endemics, the Okinawa Rail. This species was only described for the first time relatively recently. Although it is still quite common in its ever-shrinking range it can be hard to see and may require some persistent searching. Whilst looking for the rail, we are likely to see more Ryukyu Scops Owls and, with luck, we will even see the little known Japanese Scops Owl, here of the form *pryeri*.

**Day 15** Okinawa is still a verdant subtropical island, but sadly much of the original forest has been cut and nowadays the remaining patches are mainly along the ridges. As well as the Okinawa Rail, the forests hold the endemic Pryer's (or Okinawa) Woodpecker, one of the rarest woodpeckers in the world. The latter is almost as elusive as the rail, but the young will recently have left the nest at this time

of year and their calls should help us locate a family party. Whilst out on the forest tracks we should also encounter Whistling (or Red-capped) Green Pigeon and the most attractive and voluble songster of the region, the endemic Ryukyu Robin. We will also have another chance to find species such as Ryukyu Minivet and Ruddy Kingfisher. At the various dams we will look for the colourful though secretive Mandarin Duck and we may well see House Swifts overhead, whilst along the coastline the rocky islets hold elegant Black-naped and Roseate Terns.

**Day 16** After some final birding on Okinawa we will take a late afternoon flight to Tokyo for an overnight stay.

**Day 17** The tour ends this morning in Tokyo.

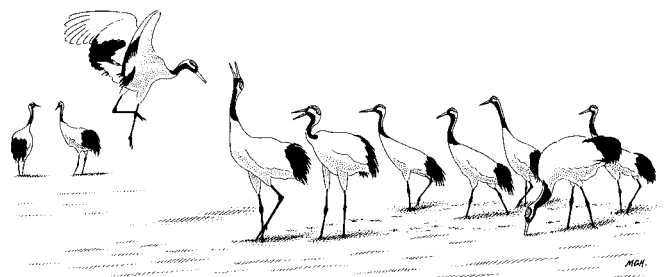
#### **Hokkaido Post-Tour Extension Itinerary**

**Day 17** This morning we will take an early flight to Asahikawa, situated in the heart of the northernmost island of Hokkaido, from where we will head east to Oketo Lake for a two nights stay. Lying to the north of Blakiston's Line, the avifauna is somewhat different here, having a more Siberian influence, and spring will only recently have arrived. Later we will begin our exploration of this fascinating area.

**Day 18** The lush forests in this part of Hokkaido share

many species with the forests of central Honshu and so we will reacquaint ourselves with many of our old friends such as White-bellied Pigeon, Japanese Robin and Narcissus Flycatcher. There are, in addition, a number of species that do not occur or are much harder to see further south, and so we will be focusing our attention on these. In particular we will be trying to find the elusive Hazel Grouse, that most impressive of swifts the White-throated Needletail, the impressive Black Woodpecker, Grey-headed Woodpecker and, with luck, the fantastic Siberian Thrush. We will also make an effort to find the furtive Grey Bunting. Other species we are likely to encounter include Marsh Tit, Hawfinch and Eurasian Siskin. At dusk the characteristic grunts and 'kisick' calls should lead us to roding Eurasian Woodcocks overhead and as darkness falls we will make a concerted effort to find Oriental Scops Owl and the declining Grey Nightjar. We will also have another chance to look for the elusive Ural Owl.

**Day 19** After a second morning in the Oketo Lake area, we will travel to the north coast of Hokkaido and then drive eastwards to Rausu for an overnight stay. As we drive along the coast we will encounter numerous Slaty-backed Gulls as well as a lingering Glaucous Gull or two and perhaps some Black-legged Kittiwakes, while offshore we should find



*Red-crowned Cranes (Michael Hodgson)*

Spectacled Guillemots. We may well encounter our first magnificent Red-crowned (or Japanese) Cranes. The latter is widely dispersed across eastern Hokkaido during the breeding season, as the cranes seek undisturbed marshes in which to breed. Our destination, Rausu, situated at the base of the Shiretoku peninsula on the east coast of Hokkaido, is dramatically scenic, with high mountains seemingly just behind the town. We will arrive in good time for we have an exciting evening ahead of us! This area of eastern Hokkaido is home to a small population of the almost mythical Blakiston's Fish Owl and we have an excellent chance of seeing this magnificent bird during our stay in the area. Only about 60 pairs are believed to survive in Hokkaido, but here at Rausu the local people are very fond of 'their' owls and every evening, as dusk approaches, the owners of our minshuku put out a few small fish for them at a floodlit pond! It usually does not take too long before this huge owl puts in an appearance, gliding down to the edge of the pond, hopping into the water and grabbing its first snack of the evening! A pair of Blakiston's Fish Owls regularly comes to the pond, and both birds may make several visits during the course of the night. Watching these splendid birds from only a few metres is indeed a rare privilege and surely ranks amongst the world's most extraordinary birding experiences!

**Day 20** This morning we will travel south to Nemuro for an overnight stay. Here, along the coast and around the vast Lake Furen, we shall turn our attention to the wetland habitats. If we have not already seen the species, we will search for the Red-crowned Cranes which breed in this area. Latham's (or Japanese) Snipe are common and can frequently be seen displaying overhead and Black-browed Reed Warblers

and Common Reed Buntings sing from the marshes. Occasional White-tailed Eagles put in an appearance, whilst other highly sought species in this area include the stunning Siberian Rubythroat, Russet Sparrow and the gorgeous Long-tailed Rosefinch. In particular, it is a trio of skulking *Locustella* warblers that will keep us busy here! The tiny and streaked Lanceolated Warbler and the larger Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler can usually be watched relatively easily once we have tracked them down by their repetitive songs. The larger Gray's Grasshopper Warbler is, however, rather more secretive. Fortunately, however, they are both noisy and fairly common, and this early in the season the lush vegetation in which they can hide is not too plentiful, and so, with a bit of persistence, we should be rewarded with some views of this, the largest member of the genus! Whilst searching the marshes and adjacent coast, we will come across a number of other species which may include Red-necked Grebe and Sand Martin, and we are likely to find a few species of wildfowl, including some lingering winter visitors, which may include Red-throated and Pacific Divers (or Red-throated and Pacific Loons), Falcated Duck, Greater Scaup, Goosander (or Common Merganser), Stejneger's and Black Scoters (split from Velvet and Common respectively), and the superb Harlequin Duck.

**Day 21** This morning we will look for any species we have not yet seen around Lake Furen before driving west to Cape Kiritappu. This site was long famous as a breeding location for Tufted Puffins, but sadly this species is now incredibly rare and on the verge of extinction here. Whilst looking out for the last of these impressive puffins, we will see a number of other species including Japanese

and Pelagic Cormorants, and, with luck, Rhinoceros Auklet. Later we will continue west to Kushiro from where we will take an evening flight back to Tokyo for an overnight stay.

**Day 22** The extension ends this morning at Tokyo.

### Bonin Islands Extension

The remote and seldom visited Bonin Islands house another endemic, the Bonin Islands White-eye (formerly mistakenly placed with the honeyeaters, as Bonin Islands Honeyeater). There are also endemic forms of Japanese Woodpigeon and Japanese Bush Warbler that may in the future be split. In addition, the long ferry journey to and from the islands, or between the islands, offers an excellent chance for additional seabirds including, amongst others, Bonin Petrel, Bannerman's Shearwater, Matsudaira's Storm-petrel, Wedge-tailed Shearwater, Brown Noddy and Sooty Tern. If we are very lucky we will even see the rare Short-tailed Albatross or White-necked Petrel! Due to an infrequent ferry schedule, a visit will add up to a week to the holiday and the price will depend on the number of participants and the extension duration. Please indicate when booking this tour if you are interested in this optional extension and we will let you know the potential cost once the number of interested participants is known.

### Accommodation & Road

**Transport:** The western-style and Japanese-style hotels are mostly of normal Birdquest standard. At Miyake-jima, Yamburu and Mi-ike, we will be staying in Japanese-style guesthouses (minshukus). The minshukus will be spotlessly clean and quite comfortable, but it should be appreciated minshuku are quite simple establishments with Japanese-style futons to sleep on rather than conventional beds and bathroom facilities are shared. Accommodation on

the overnight ferry outbound to Miyake-jima is in twin-berth cabins. At Rausu, where we spend one night, the minshuku is very small, so there will be several people in each room and bathroom facilities are shared. Road transport is by minibus and roads are good.

**Walking etc:** The walking effort is easy throughout, but the long daylight hours in the northern islands tend to result in some long days in the field.

**Climate:** It will be warm or hot in most areas, but will range from cool to warm in upland areas on Honshu and on Hokkaido. There will be a mixture of dry and sunny and wet and overcast conditions, with rather high humidity in the south.

**Bird Photography:** Opportunities will be worthwhile.



Lanceolated Warbler (Tony Disley)