

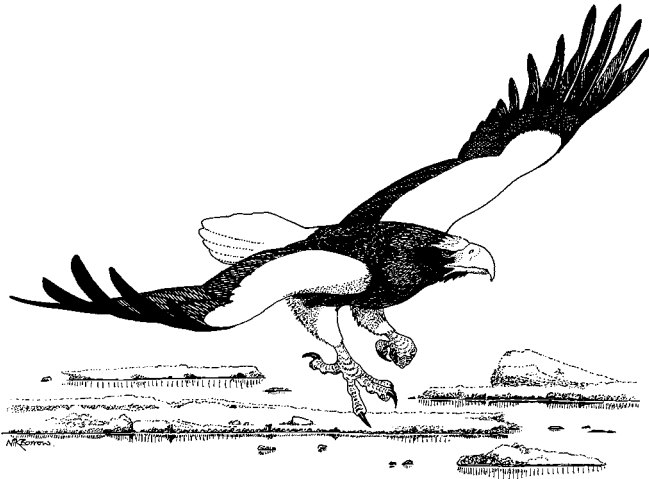
## JAPAN IN WINTER

*Sunday 6th February – Sunday 20th February 2011 (15 days)  
Pelagic Post-Tour Extension to Tuesday 22nd February (2 days)*

*Leaders: Dave Farrow and Chikara Otani*

*Group Size Limit: 12*

*Tour Category: Easy walking, but cold weather and Japanese food make the overall grading for most participants Easy to Moderate*



*Steller's Sea Eagle (Nik Borrow)*

Japan, with its many islands and its wide range of climatic conditions, has a rich avifauna and, in particular, a number of fascinating endemic species ranging from the beautiful Copper Pheasant to the attractive Japanese Green Woodpecker. It is, however, during the winter months that Japan really comes into its own, for then it plays host to three of the greatest avian spectacles on earth: the great gathering of the Hooded and White-naped Cranes at Arasaki, the amazing concentration of that king of raptors, the huge Steller's Sea Eagle, in eastern Hokkaido and, on that same island, the incomparable dancing amidst the snow of the Red-crowned Cranes.

This tour provides the perfect opportunity to see the best birding that Japan has to offer; its awesome crane and eagle spectacles. In addition we shall see many other wintering birds ranging from Spectacled Guillemot to Asian Rosy Finch, as well as many resident species, including the remarkable Blakiston's Fish Owl.

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.

After leaving the sprawling metropolis of Tokyo behind us, we will head inland for an exploration of the forested mountains of central Honshu where Copper Pheasant, Japanese Green Woodpecker, Japanese Waxwing, Japanese

Grosbeak and a series of other interesting species can be found. From here we will drive, via the incredible 'snow monkeys' of Nagano, to Komatsu on the Japan Sea coast of Honshu, our base for a visit to Katano Kamoi-ike, home of one of the few regular wintering flocks of the beautiful Baikal Teal in the islands.

Next we will fly southwards to the island of Kyushu, where we will visit the famous crane reserve at Arasaki (where up to six species of crane occur!) and search for Black-faced Spoonbill, Saunders's Gull, Japanese Murrelet and Grey Bunting.

In complete contrast, the last part of the tour will be spent in far northern Japan. During our visit to Hokkaido we will make a thorough exploration of the eastern end of this superb island, a region of mountains, forests, frozen lakes and seacoasts which contains some of Japan's most exciting birding localities, including Capes Nosappu and Kiritappu with their seabirds, sea ducks and Asian Rosy Finches, Rausu with its Steller's Sea Eagles and Blakiston's Fish Owls, and the marshy country north of Kushiro where the Red-crowned Cranes dance in the winter sunshine.

During the optional extension, we will take a pelagic trip out beyond Tokyo Bay, where we will have an excellent chance of seeing the highly-sought-after Short-tailed Albatross, as well as Black-footed and Laysan Albatrosses, and Tristram's Storm-Petrel.

Birdquest has operated tours to Japan since 1987.

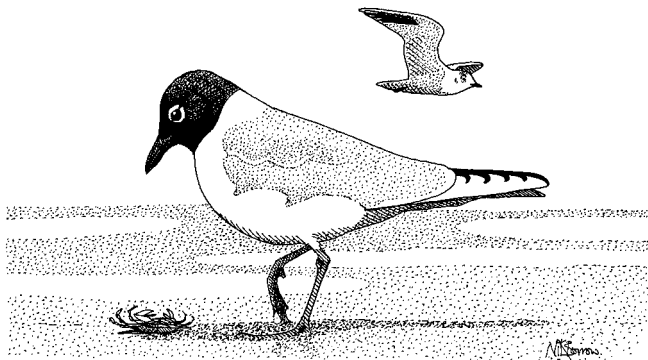
### Itinerary

**Day 1** The tour begins this morning at Narita Airport near Tokyo. We will then transfer to central Tokyo where we will board our train to Karuizawa, situated in the mountains of central Honshu to the west of the capital. Upon arrival at

Naka-Karuizawa station we will drive the short distance to our lovely hotel, where we stay for three nights and where excellent food and warm hospitality await us. Later in the afternoon we will have our first opportunity to explore this fascinating area.

**Days 2-3** This attractive region of rugged peaks and forested valleys is excellent for birding. Much of our time will be spent in the snow-covered deciduous forests where at this season some exciting winter visitors will have swelled the ranks of the resident birds. Amongst the more interesting species we should find here are the endemic Japanese Green Woodpecker, Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, the handsome breeding-endemic Japanese Wagtail, the near-endemic Brown-eared Bulbul, the near-endemic Japanese Accentor, the attractive Varied Tit, the impressive Japanese Grosbeak (often in large flocks at bird feeders) and winter visitors such as the beautiful Japanese Waxwing (present in the area most winters, though somewhat erratic), Northern





*Saunders's Gull (Nik Borrow)*

Red-flanked Bluetail, Daurian Redstart, Dusky Thrush, the lovely Long-tailed Rosefinch, and Rustic Bunting. In some winters Pallas's Rosefinches from Siberia frequent these valleys, sometimes visiting the bird feeders. Copper Pheasants are still fairly common here, and although they are shy and elusive we have a reasonable chance of seeing this splendid endemic species during our stay. Other species we are likely to encounter here include Oriental Turtle Dove, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Brown Dipper, Winter Wren, Long-tailed Tit, Willow Tit, Coal Tit, Japanese Tit (split from Great), Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Jay, Asian Azure-winged Magpie, Large-billed Crow, Oriental Crow (split from Carrion), Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Brambling, Grey-capped Greenfinch, Hawfinch and Meadow Bunting, while Grey-bellied Bullfinch (split from Eurasian) is occasionally encountered. We will also visit a small lake where we will have our first opportunity to see wetland birds. Numbers of wintering ducks are often impressive in East Asia and this small area should produce good numbers of the delightful Smew as well as Chinese Spot-billed Duck, Mallard, Eurasian Wigeon, Eurasian Teal, Gadwall, Common Pochard, Tufted Duck and Goosander (or Common Merganser). We may also find one or two of the scarcer

species such as the smart Falcated Duck or the rare but equally beautiful Baikal Teal. Other species often present include Little Grebe, Great Cormorant, Grey Heron, Black-eared Kite (split from Black) and Eurasian Coot, while a nearby river holds the localized and unobtrusive Long-billed Plover, which shares the shingle islands with Black-backed Wagtails (split from White) and the impressive Crested Kingfisher.

**Day 4** This morning we will drive northwest to Nagano and make a detour up into the mountains where we will spend a couple of hours with the magical 'snow monkeys'. Made famous by numerous television documentaries and magazine articles, the Japanese Macaques here are both bold and entertaining! With their thick coats covered in snow and ice, they squabble and chase each other over the rocky snow-covered hillsides, perhaps pausing to climb up and play on an unattended tripod before dipping into their natural, thermally-heated 'hot tub' for a steamy soak! Up to a hundred or more macaques visit this incredibly scenic site and the whole experience of being in amongst these charismatic primates is quite exhilarating! Whilst here, we are likely to encounter a few common forest birds, including Goldcrest, Eurasian Treecreeper and Eurasian

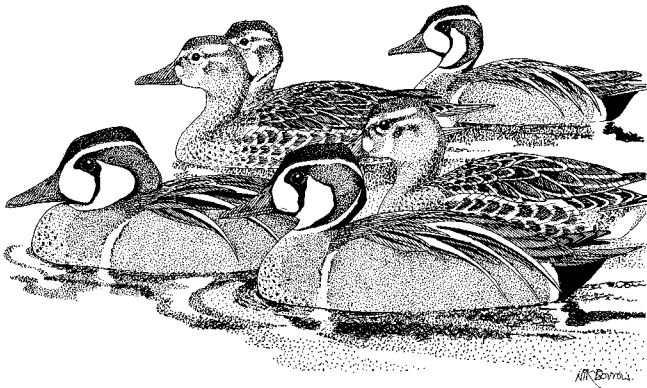
Siskin. Later we will continue to the Komatsu region on the western (Japan Sea) coast of Honshu for a two nights stay at Kaga. We should arrive in time for some initial exploration.

**Day 5** Today we will search a series of wetlands on the Japan Sea coast of Honshu where thousands of waterfowl winter. In particular we will visit the Katano Kamo-ike reserve, a small but attractive lake surrounded by rice fields and patches of woodland, with the coast not far away. The lake is famous as the best place in Japan for seeing the exquisite Baikal Teal; a small flock of this endangered bird winters here every year. Other species we should encounter today include Black-throated (or Arctic) Loon, Bewick's Swan (once more considered a full species), Taiga Bean Goose (of the form *middendorffii*), Tundra Bean Geese (a few, of the form *serrirostris*, are usually present), Falcated Duck and Grey-headed Lapwing. We will also search an area of fields further south, which is the feeding area for a large flock of Greater White-fronted Geese. Some careful searching here may well reveal the presence of one or two Lesser White-fronted Geese. We will also keep a lookout for the attractive, but often secretive, endemic Green Pheasant in this area. This area is also good for vagrants, and species we have seen in the past include Cackling (split from Canada), Swan and Snow Geese, Ruddy Shelduck, Scaly-sided Merganser and Red-billed (or Silky) Starling.

**Day 6** This morning we will take a flight to Fukuoka, a large city situated at the northern end of the island of Kyushu. From here we will drive south through intensively cultivated lowlands to Arasaki for a two nights stay. On the way, we will call in at a large area of mudflats and sandbanks where a small flock of Saunders's Gulls can

usually be found. These rare and little-known gulls feed on crabs, which they find by patrolling the mudflats. Gull aficionados will have a whale of a time here as we can expect to see Black-headed Gull, Black-tailed Gull, Kamchatka Gull (split from Common), Vega Gull, Heuglin's Gull (of the form *taimyrensis*, which may in fact be a hybrid form with Vega Gull), Slaty-backed Gull and, with luck, Mongolian Gull (split from Caspian). This is also the only place in Japan where Pallas's (or Great Black-headed) Gull can regularly be found, and if the tide is right, we will have a good chance of finding this impressive species.

**Day 7** The fallow rice paddies around Arasaki are the site of one of the largest winter gatherings of cranes in all Asia. Depending on the winter, up to 10,000 Hooded Cranes are to be found in the area, in addition to up to 3500 superbly elegant White-naped Cranes, making for one of the world's top birding spectacles. During our stay at Arasaki we shall enjoy some wonderful close-up views of the cranes, especially when large numbers gather directly outside the guesthouse in which we will be staying in the very heart of the reserve. Here they come to feed on the maize and fish put out for them by the owner, who is also the reserve warden. At this season there is constant activity as small groups of cranes, often still in family groups, bugle energetically or dance into the air. Others form flocks and fly off, trumpeting loudly as they circle upwards before moving away to feed in the rice fields. We will be on the lookout for the odd Sandhill Crane or Common Crane amongst the thousands of Hooded and White-naped Cranes (and if we are lucky a vagrant Demoiselle or Siberian!). Arasaki is of course famous the world over for its amazing crane spectacle, but its diversity of habitats (a mosaic of rice fields, rivers,

*Baikal Teals (Nik Borrow)*

drainage canals, reedbeds, scrub, woodland and intertidal mudflats) also make it one of the richest places for general winter birding in Japan. Familiar wildfowl are present in large numbers and include Northern Pintail and Northern Shoveler which share the rice fields and the maize with the cranes. Amongst the reedbeds, we will keep a lookout for Chinese Penduline Tits. Japanese Quail can very occasionally be found amongst the rice fields. Along the rivers we have a second opportunity for Long-billed Plover and Crested Kingfisher, whilst small patches of woodland hold wintering Dusky and Pale Thrushes. Other birds we may well see here include Black-crowned Night Heron, Little Egret, Great Egret, Peregrine, Kentish Plover, Green Sandpiper, Buff-bellied Pipit (of the distinctive form *japonicus*), Zitting Cisticola, Japanese White-eye, Bull-headed Shrike, Daurian Jackdaw, Rook (this eastern form being a good candidate for a future split as Oriental Rook), White-cheeked Starling, Black-faced Bunting (of the yellow-bellied form *personata*) and Chestnut-eared and Common Reed Buntings. A little inland, areas of small-scale cultivation and woodland hold Olive-backed Pipit and Japanese Bush Warbler, while the rocky coastline holds Temminck's

Cormorant. Other species which we should encounter during our explorations of the Arasaki area include Great-crested Grebe, Eastern Cattle Egret, Red-breasted Merganser, Osprey, Japanese Buzzard (split from Common), Common Kestrel, Common Moorhen, Northern Lapwing, Dunlin, Common Snipe, Common Sandpiper, House Swift, Common Kingfisher, Japanese Skylark (split from Eurasian), Asian House Martin and Grey Wagtail. With luck we will come across one of the more elusive species such as Eastern Water Rail or Ruddy-breasted Crake. We will also visit another locality where we will have a good chance of finding the spectacular Mandarin Duck and White-bellied (or Japanese Green) Pigeon, while amongst some nearby paddies we should find Eastern Marsh Harrier, Red-throated Pipit and Russet Sparrow. In recent years a Greater Spotted Eagle, a vagrant to Japan, has been wintering in this area and we will have a reasonable chance of seeing it, provided it has returned.

**Day 8** After spending much of the day at Arasaki we will drive up into the highlands of Kyushu to Mi-ike for a two nights stay.

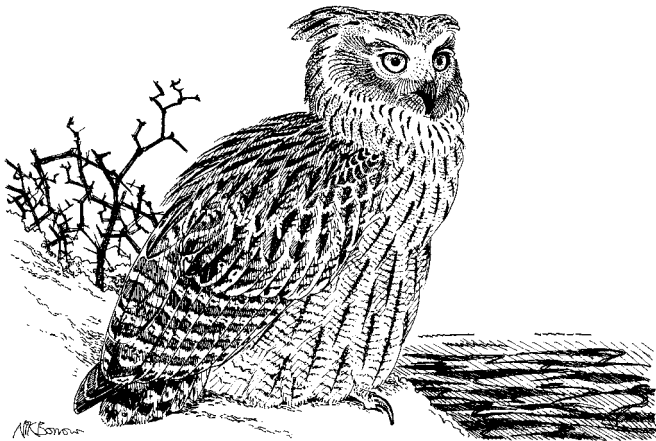
**Day 9** This morning we will start early and drive to the

east coast of Kyushu with the aim of locating one of Japan's most elusive specialities, the endangered Japanese Murrelet. We will search harbours and headlands close to its largest known breeding colony (on an offshore islet), and we have an excellent chance of finding this globally threatened species. We may even be able to arrange for a short boat trip to allow us closer views of this tiny sea-dweller. During the pursuit we may well come across an Eastern Reef Egret or a Blue Rock Thrush, and we will have another opportunity to see Temminck's Cormorant and study puzzling gulls. Later we will visit a small lake set in a forest where a number of Mandarin Ducks are often present amongst the countless wintering wildfowl, and where we should also find the gorgeous Yellow-throated Bunting and have our first chance for the elusive Ryukyu Minivet, here at the northern limit of its range. We will also call in at an interesting estuary where we are likely to get good views of Black-faced Spoonbills and perhaps also Eurasian Spoonbills. The east coast of Kyushu has a very different feel from the west coast, the milder climate and palm-fringed beaches providing a suitable winter home for Barn Swallows.

**Day 10** The impressive and famous crater lake at Mi-ike holds good numbers of wintering ducks, sometimes including a few Baikal Teal, whilst the surrounding forest holds some interesting birds. Ryukyu Minivet (only relatively recently found to be resident in southern Kyushu) occurs here amongst the huge deciduous trees, as does White-backed Woodpecker, and we could also come across the superb White's Thrush (split from Scaly Thrush, this species seems to wobble on its legs as it feeds). In particular, we will search through the wintering buntings for the secretive Grey Bunting. Later we will take a flight to

Tokyo and then a connecting flight to Kushiro on the northern island of Hokkaido for an overnight stay nearby.

**Day 11** Our main priority this morning will be to watch the magnificent Red-crowned (or Japanese) Cranes that winter in this area. Red-crowned Cranes are widely dispersed across eastern Hokkaido during the breeding season, but in the winter months they are concentrated in the complex of damp fields and marshlands to the north of Kushiro. We shall begin the day at a river where many of the cranes roost, hoping it is cold enough to create ideal viewing conditions. As steam rises from the river, the cranes slowly wake up and begin bugling, the thick hoar frost on the riverside trees adding to the romantic scene. Once the temperature begins to creep up, the cranes leave their roost and move off to feed. In the morning a large flock, generally of over 100 birds, gathers at one of the places where they are regularly fed. At this season the Red-crowned Cranes are dancing frequently and as one pair begins its courtship dance the infection spreads through the flock like a wave until dozens of striking black and white birds are leaping into the air or throwing back their heads and bugling towards heaven. It is a thrilling spectacle, and as we watch this wonder of nature we will truly appreciate why we have come all the way to this remote corner of Japan. We will also explore the deciduous woodlands nearby. Marsh Tits are not uncommon here and we may well see the very pale and attractive *asiatica* subspecies of the Eurasian Nuthatch. If luck is on our side, we will come across a sleepy Ural Owl. Later we will drive to Rausu, situated at the base of the Shiretoku peninsula on the east coast of Hokkaido, for an overnight stay. We will arrive in good time for we have an exciting evening ahead of us! This area of



*Blakiston's Fish Owl (Nik Borrow)*

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 away from the comfort of our little guesthouse is indeed a rare privilege and surely ranks amongst the world's most extraordinary birding experiences!

**Day 12** Although conditions vary from year to year (and indeed from week to week!), there is usually some pack-ice close to Rausu. This morning, weather and ice conditions permitting, we will take a boat out to the pack-ice for what

has to be one of the most amazing adventures any of us will have been on! Setting off in the dark, we will soon be accompanied by hordes of Slaty-backed, Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls as we head over to the pack-ice on a boat laden with treats for our avian friends. Soon some bigger shapes appear, and as the sun rises we will be surrounded by incredible Steller's and White-tailed Sea-Eagles! Over the next hour or two we will be totally awestruck, watching dozens of these giants fighting over fish just a few metres away with towering snow-covered peaks as a backdrop. It really is a once-in-a-lifetime experience! With luck, we will also see some impressive Larcha Seals hauled out on the ice. Returning to the harbour, we will have a good look at the fabulous Harlequin Ducks. (Even if the sea ice is absent at Rausu, we will still enjoy awesome close views of the eagles as they perch in trees and on rocks all the way along the coastline!) Later we will drive southwestwards along the coast of Hokkaido to Nemuro for a two nights stay. Along the way we will stop off to admire a large wintering flock of Whooper Swans, surviving in these harsh conditions thanks to regular handouts of food from local

people, who also try to keep the ice broken. These majestic swans have in consequence become very tame, as have the accompanying Northern Pintails which look quite spectacular at close range against a backdrop of ice. We will also visit Lake Furen, which has one of the largest winter gatherings of Steller's Sea Eagles. The birds migrate southwards from their breeding grounds in eastern Siberia and Kamchatka to feed on the concentrations of fish in the lakes and coastal waters of Hokkaido. These splendid creatures used to be more heavily concentrated further north on Hokkaido, around Rausu and the Shiretoko peninsula, but with the depletion of the fish stocks there through overfishing larger numbers now come further south and concentrate at this generally frozen lake. By February up to 1000 or more of these magnificent birds can be found in the area. Local fishermen drill holes in the ice and the birds scavenge on their spoils. Eagles can be seen dotted about on the frozen lake in all directions, or flapping heavily along as they travel from one feeding area to another. Still later, great spirals gather above the ice, the birds swirling majestically round and round before coming to rest in the trees along the lakeshore. Often adult birds come very close, giving superb views of their massive yellow bills and striking pied plumage. A large number of White-tailed Eagles also occur in the area, but whereas these seem very large raptors elsewhere, here they seem more like Common Buzzards measuring themselves against Golden Eagles! All in all, the spectacle of the eagles of Hokkaido is something one never forgets!

**Day 13** Nemuro is situated at the base of the ornithologically famous Nemuro peninsula and the surrounding area provides some of the finest birding in the Japanese islands. The

countryside around Lakes Furen and Chobushi, which will be frozen over at the time of our visit, is predominantly forested and after a sudden snowfall the landscape takes on a real 'winter wonderland' appearance. Landbirds are rather limited at this time of year, so it is the sea coasts and harbours that hold most attraction for the birdwatcher. At Cape Nosappu the waters are thronged with sea ducks, including flocks of Long-tailed Ducks, Common Goldeneyes, and Stejneger's and Black Scoters (split from Velvet and Common respectively). Pelagic and occasionally Red-faced Cormorants feed offshore, whilst Spectacled Guillemots, Common Guillemots, Crested and Least Auklets, and Ancient Murrelets can sometimes be seen bobbing up and down in the waves, although often quite far out. Other species we can expect to see in the region include Red-throated Loon, Red-necked Grebe and Greater Scaup, while Pacific Loons are occasionally present. With luck, we will encounter one or two of the more erratic winter visitors such as Rough-legged Buzzard, Short-eared Owl, Common Redpoll or Snow Bunting. Mammals are mostly inconspicuous, but large numbers of Sika Deer can be found foraging along forest edges and Harbour (or Common) Seals frequent quiet stretches of water amongst the ice floes.

**Day 14** This morning we will have a second opportunity to look for anything we have not yet seen around the Nemuro Peninsula before heading back towards Kushiro. On the way, we will make a detour to Cape Kiritappu as this is a regular location for the attractive Asian Rosy Finch, and the headland may produce a new seabird for us. Later we will arrive at Kushiro airport and catch an early evening flight to Tokyo for an overnight stay at Narita Airport.

**Day 15** An early morning

walk near our hotel, before the tour ends this morning, may well turn up a Brown-headed Thrush as well as provide a last look at a number of common Japanese birds.

#### **Pelagic Post-Tour Extension Itinerary**

**Day 15** We will take a trip into Tokyo, where a visit to one or more of the many urban parks and nature reserves will produce photographic opportunities of a number of commoner species and may turn up Asian Azure-winged Magpies and perhaps a vagrant duck or shorebird. Later we will board our vessel and begin our exciting pelagic into Tokyo Bay. We will overnight in comfortable cabins on the boat.

**Day 16** Weather permitting,

we will spend all day at sea in the outer reaches of Tokyo Bay and beyond. This is a great time of year for watching albatrosses, and we have an excellent chance of finding Black-footed and Laysan Albatrosses and that holy grail of them all, the spectacular and rare Short-tailed Albatross. Although most birds in these waters at this time of year are immatures, we have a good chance of finding this species and with luck will even encounter an adult. Whilst looking for albatrosses, we are also likely to encounter Northern Fulmar, Streaked Shearwater, Tristram's Storm-Petrel (which is largely a winter breeder), Pomarine Skua (or Pomarine Jaeger) and Black-legged Kittiwake, and we may well turn up one or two surprises. In the evening we will return to Tokyo for

an overnight stay at Narita Airport. (It is possible that rough weather could curtail our time at sea.)

**Day 17** The tour ends this morning at Narita Airport.

#### **Accommodation & Road**

**Transport:** The western-style or Japanese-style hotels are mostly of normal Birdquest standard. At Arasaki (for two nights), at Mi-ike (for two nights), near Kushiro (for one night) and at Rausu (for one night) we will be staying in Japanese-style guesthouses (minshuku). These 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. There may be two or more people per room at Arasaki and bathroom facilities are

shared. At Rausu, the minshuku is very small, so there will be several people in each room and bathroom facilities are shared. During the extension, accommodation for one night during the pelagic is in twin-berth cabins. Road transport is by minibus and roads are good.

**Walking:** The walking effort is easy throughout.

**Climate:** Rather variable. It will be quite mild (i.e. merely cool) in Kyushu, but it will be cold in Honshu and it will be cold or very cold in Hokkaido. It may rain at times in the south, or snow in the north (where snow will be lying on the ground), but the weather is predominantly dry and sunny at this season.

**Bird/Mammal Photography:** Opportunities are excellent.