



Copper Pheasant (all photos by D.Farrow)

JAPAN IN WINTER

8 – 22/24 FEBRUARY 2015

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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 where in the crisp snowy hills we saw five Copper Pheasant, swarms of Japanese Waxwings, Long-tailed Rosefinches and Japanese Accentors. We visited the Snow Monkeys of Nagano, and along the north coast we saw Baikal Teal, Tundra and Taiga Bean Geese, Rhinoceros Auklets, Grey-headed Lapwings and Japanese Cormorants. Shifting to the supposedly warmer climes of Kyushu, we enjoyed the spectacle of thousands of

Hooded and White-naped Cranes at Arasaki, along with Black-faced Spoonbills, Long-billed Dowitcher and Long-toed Stint, Ruddy-breasted Crake, Daurian Jackdaw, Chinese Penduline Tits and Chestnut-eared Buntings. Elsewhere in Kyushu we saw Japanese Murrelets, Long-billed Plovers, Saunders's and Heuglin's Gulls, White-bellied Green Pigeon, a Greater Spotted Eagle, Crested Kingfisher, Forest Wagtail, Yellow-throated Buntings and Ryukyu Minivets. The third island as always was a thrill, in the snow and ice of Hokkaido we saw the dancing Red-crowned Cranes, plus 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. Also around Hokkaido we saw Spectacled, Pigeon and Brunnich's Guillemots, Ancient Murrelets and Least Auklets. A Blakiston's Fish Owl was watched catching his supper in a snowy streambed, and a fine pair of Ural Owls were seen at a daytime roost. We saw two groups of superb Pallas's Rosefinches, plus a flock of the equally pretty Asian Rosy Finches. Very importantly, we dodged some disruptive snowstorms, and coincided with the arrival of the pack ice. We had a splendid pelagic extension to the tour, and a great morning at sea provided good numbers of Short-tailed Albatross, plus Laysan and Black-footed Albatross and many Tristram's Storm Petrels. Other mammals seen included Raccoon Dog, Japanese Giant Flying Squirrel, Japanese Serow and a couple of Sea Otter, in all it adds 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.

Once we had all assembled at Narita airport, we made our way onto the Narita Express, which sped us into the heart of Tokyo station. A typically brisk departure on a bullet train (those doors don't stay open for long...) and we were propelled us across the plains and into the snowy hills at a top speed of 232 kph, our journey taking just one hour! On arriving at Karuizawa we transferred into vehicles and headed uphill to our hotel, where well-stocked bird feeders outside the window attracted Varied Tits and Japanese Tits. A small brown bird was noticed sitting in a nearby bush – Japanese Accentor! So soon - an auspicious start indeed! We headed into the local woods for the remainder of the afternoon and enjoyed some good looks at Japanese Green and Pygmy Woodpeckers, Willow Tit and Brown Dippers, and among many mammal tracks we found the footprints of Copper Pheasants freshly marked into the snow.



Japanese Waxwing



Rustic Bunting

Before breakfast, while the temperature was well below freezing, we walked the snowy woodland tracks and were very pleasantly surprised to find a flock of Japanese Waxwings feeding actively in a big clump of mistletoe. They seem to have recently arrived, and were buzzing around the woods in several small flocks, showing off their vivid red tail tips. Around our hotel we found a female Long-tailed Rosefinch, joined by a smart male Daurian Redstart, numerous Grey-capped Greenfinches and some Eurasian Siskin, plus the Japanese Accentor reappeared. Further explorations around the Karuizawa area produced Red-flanked Bluetail, Meadow Buntings, Eurasian Treecreeper, Coal and Willow Tits, and a cheeky Japanese Giant

Flying Squirrel that peeked out of his box at us. We travelled into the lower lying valleys, where on a partly frozen lake we found a quartet of drake Smew, Northern Pintail and Eurasian Wigeon, and on the adjacent river were a pair of Long-billed Plover, Common Snipe, Goosander, Japanese Buzzard and Japanese Wagtails. An attempt to find Ural Owl at nightfall drew a blank, but the banquet served at the hotel that evening was truly delicious!

The next morning was bright and crisp (and touching 9 degrees below zero!) and the bird feeders at our hotel were busy with Pale Thrush, Japanese Accentor and Brambling. We headed out into the hills and slowly drove along a forest road, where sharp eyes spotted our quarry, Copper Pheasant, feeding on a slope above the road. As we scrambled about trying to get views, it became apparent that in addition to a stunning male, there were also four females! They scuttled out of view quickly, but we kept our cool and before long they re-emerged at the top of the roadside slope, the male occasionally popping into view with a pulse of red as the sun shone on his beautiful plumage. In all we watched them for nearly an hour - so lucky! Further along the road we found a superb male Long-tailed Rosefinch, some more Japanese Accentors, a Mountain Hawk Eagle flew over calling and a big bull Japanese Serow gave us a good view as he stood on a hillside. Further explorations provided some Chinese Hwamei and Grey-bellied Bullfinches, and close to town we found flocks of Meadow and Rustic Buntings. In the afternoon we visited an area of fields where we saw five Green Pheasants (to make it a two Pheasant day), a flock of Azure-winged Magpies, Bull-headed Shrikes and more Rustic Buntings. We finished our day with a drive up another forest road that went high onto the slopes of Mount Asayama, found another Japanese Serow, our first Sika and some more Long-tailed Rosefinches. What a splendid day!



Japanese Serow



Japanese Macaque

The next morning we had nice views of Japanese Grosbeaks sat high in the larches by the hotel car park, then we drove a couple of hours up to Nagano and the Snow Monkey Park. Snow was piled high everywhere, in places sculpted into dramatic shapes, but the trail was well worn up to the Monkey's bathing pool. As this attraction gets ever more popular and not just among photography tours, there seemed to be more people than Monkeys! Nevertheless we enjoyed these furry fellows, with their cute babies and their rough-and-tumble antics in the snow as they squabbled over grain, with a few making it into the pool for some classic photos. Few if any birds were seen here, and we hit the road up to the north coast and then along a highway with innumerable tunnels. We made a brief stop in Kanazawa where we made an unsuccessful attempt to find a reported Scaly-sided Merganser, however Brown Dipper, Long-billed Plovers and some Goosanders were nice to see. As is so often the case on this coast, the rain and drizzle moved in, so we headed off to our lodgings at Kaga.

We began our day searching the rice paddies of the coastal plain for flocks of Greater White-fronted Geese, however we could only find one small group, but a flock of Bewick's Swans that included a small of number

of Whoopers was nice to see. Nearby we found a couple of Grey-headed Lapwings at the roadside, and once the persistent rain had stopped we found a perched Merlin and a male Green Pheasant walking in the fields. We headed for a nearby headland where we saw a collection of Temminck's and Pelagic Cormorants sat on a rock, but rainy squalls blew in and made for difficult viewing. From a more sheltered viewpoint we saw several Divers flying by, including a small number of Pacific and Red-throated, plus a raft of 20+ Black-throated Divers, Red-necked Grebes, some distant Rhinoceros Auklets and small flocks of Ancient Murrelets flying past. Next it was time to buy our picnic lunches and take them to the comfort of the enclosed Observatory at Katano Kamo-Ike, where there were a good number of Baikal Teal (even if they were all at the far end of the lake!) plus many other waterfowl including a number of Taiga Bean Geese. We headed off on a hunt for Solitary Snipe, which took us down some snowy forest tracks in the worsening rain that was turning to snow, poor conditions for finding any birds at all let alone shy forest-dwelling Snipe! Repelled by the weather, we headed back to the relative comfort of the Duck Observatory, and before darkness fell were able to study some Tundra Bean Geese that emerged from the wooded edges.



Grey-headed Lapwing



Western Osprey

The next day we left the sleet and snow that was descending on this part of Japan, and flew down to Fukuoka in Kyushu. With new vehicles, we headed southwards down the highway in sunshine (not that it was warm yet!) and paused at a tidal estuary. Here we spent a pleasant couple of hours birding from the top of an embankment, our visit well-timed as the tide had just turned and was beginning to drop. Our main target was the delightful Saunders's Gull, and a couple of dozen were here feeding up and down the strand, diving into the shallows and uttering their tern-like calls. In addition we found a group of five Black-faced Spoonbills, and numerous shorebirds included a couple of Terek Sandpipers (a write-in), groups of Kentish Plovers, Dunlin, Grey Plover, Common Greenshank, and a small group of *taimyrensis* Heuglin's Gulls alongside the more standard Vega Gulls. Also here were Red-breasted Mergansers and Common Shelduck, while Ospreys circled over the ebbing tidal waters. Over the fields we found our first Japanese Skylarks, Buff-bellied Pipits, a flock of Russet Sparrows and a horde of Grey-capped Greenfinches. We continued on our way to Arasaki, arriving at our well-appointed lodgings in time to see groups of Hooded Cranes heading to roost against the dusk sky.

At dawn we watched flocks of Cranes flying into the Arasaki fields against an orange sky, with the majority Hooded Cranes joined by the elegant White-naped Cranes, plus there were a few Sandhill and Common Cranes. In muddy rice-fields we also found a fine Long-billed Dowitcher, Northern Lapwings and many Common Snipe, plus a trio of Eurasian Spoonbills. The wires were festooned with Oriental Rooks, plus a single handsome Daurian Jackdaw, a pied adult. Further explorations around the fields and ditches produced several Chestnut-eared Buntings and a lively flock of Chinese Penduline Tits. In the afternoon we visited a wooded lake, where we glimpsed a Grey Bunting, had a flyover Ryukyu Minivet, found our first

Mandarin Ducks and saw Daurian Redstarts, Red-flanked Bluetail, Pale Thrushes and a nice little group of Yellow-throated Buntings.



Hooded Cranes



Japanese Murrelet

At dawn the next morning we enjoyed a good look at a Ruddy-breasted Crake feeding in the frosty shallows, one of six birds heard calling here. We saw both Eurasian and Black-faced Spoonbills, and the Long-billed Dowitcher reappeared alongside a Long-toed Stint in the same field. The Cranes of course were all around us, as were Russet Sparrows, Dusky Thrushes, Japanese Skylarks and Buff-bellied Pipits, and we enjoyed some time just soaking up the atmosphere around our guesthouse before the time came for us to move on. We headed southwards, pausing at a river where we saw Long-billed Plover, Japanese Wagtails and a splendid Crested Kingfisher, before continuing to Mi-ike. Around the crater lake we saw Yellow-throated Buntings, Brambling, Olive-backed Pipits, a stray Forest Wagtail, (which was also here last winter!) a glimpse of a furtive White-backed Woodpecker, plus a pair of perched Ryukyu Minivets and a Japanese Green Woodpecker. In line with its reputation for good food, our lodgings provided one of the best feasts of the tour.

We headed out pre-dawn for the east coast of Kyushu, and our first stop in an area of woods and fields had a gloomy start under leaden skies with fine drizzle. Nevertheless we found several White-bellied Green Pigeons, had some flyover views of Ryukyu Minivets, and saw Olive-backed Pipits, many Yellow-throated Buntings, and a few Rustic and Black-faced Buntings. On a lake crowded with Mallard we found a few Mandarin Duck, Great Crested Grebe and a Black-crowned Night Heron. Stalking through dark woodland we were taunted by some calling Grey Buntings but ultimately they declined to show. We continued up the coast to a small fishing port for our appointment with the 'Sea Sparrow', and we headed out to sea on a mini-pelagic. We were able to get very close to several delightful Japanese Murrelets, all paired up and in breeding plumage, plus we found a number of Pacific Reef Egrets, plus Black-tailed and Vega Gulls. After relaxing with a cup of green tea in the boatman's office, we headed back down the coast to an estuary where we found a first-year Greater Spotted Eagle, perched overlooking the duck flocks on the adjacent lagoon where seven Black-faced Spoonbills slept, while on the estuary mud we saw six Saunders's Gulls, Eurasian Curlew and Grey Plover. We headed home for some more excellent cuisine at our friendly hotel.

Time to leave Kyushu and head to the snowy north, a short drive took us to Kagoshima airport for our flight to Haneda, which neatly connected with our flight to Kushiro, and we were on the island of Hokkaido by early afternoon. We quickly drove up the road to the Crane centre at Akan, and were in time for the Red-crowned Cranes feeding time show. Here a few fish get thrown out to the assembled throng, which in turn attracts White-tailed Eagles and Black-eared Kites that swoop down to steal the food from the Cranes, causing both comical and spectacular encounters. After an hour of this amazing spectacle we headed down the road to where we found a pair of Ural Owls roosting in a thicket, then continuing on our way to our hotel we stumbled upon a quartet of Pallas's Rosefinches feeding at the roadside, a very welcome sight of deep pink and silver. We finished up at another Red-crowned Crane viewing area where another hundred Cranes were assembled noisily, dancing and prancing around as the light faded from the sky.



Red-crowned Cranes and White-tailed Eagles



Steller's Sea Eagle



Red Fox

We began again pre-dawn, looking out from a bridge onto a broad river where a large flock of roosting Red-crowned Cranes were awakening, and beginning to bugle and dance in the shallows. After a while there was a sudden stampede of Sika Deer from the adjacent woodland, charging across the river and putting the all Cranes to flight! As the show was now over, we returned for breakfast, but not before we had seen our first Steller's Sea Eagle perched up in a tree. Later we visited some feeders that were busy with Marsh Tits, Great Spotted Woodpecker and Eurasian Nuthatch of the *asiatica* race. We headed for the east coast, along the way finding another quartet of Pallas's Rosefinch on the roadside, this time giving even better views of their intense colours. Reaching the coast we were greeted by a great expanse of pack ice offshore, and our explorations along the Notsuke peninsula were busy. Here were good numbers of Long-tailed Duck, Black and Stejneger's Scoter, many Spectacled Guillemot, and several groups of Ancient Murrelets and Least Auklets that were unusually close to shore and offered exceptional views, due to the ice drawing ever closer to the shore and squeezing all the birds into a narrow corridor of open water. We also saw our first Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls, a very confiding Red Fox and hordes of Sika Deer, before it was time to head up the coast to Rausu and our appointment with a Blakiston's Fish Owl. We travelled along roads that had an epic amount of snow piled up alongside them, the result of a big snowstorm that had closed the roads just two days previously. We took our allotted position in a couple of rooms at the minshuku, peering out onto the stream outside that was barely visible due to the vast amount of snow in the valley. After a few hours of waiting, the Owl began calling and then before long it flew down, took a fish from the stream just in front of us and then departed into the night. Great relief all round, we retired in a happy state.

The next morning we arrived at Rausu harbour for our scheduled 'Nature Cruise', only to find the pack ice was rammed in tightly all around the coast. However, we still embarked on the boat, despite only being able to go a few hundred metres, just into the mouth of the harbour! The show still went ahead as planned, with hordes of Slaty-backed, Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls around our boat, with White-tailed and Steller's Sea Eagles flapping about and squabbling over the free fish offered to them. Once batteries were exhausted and memory cards filled, we returned to Notsuke, but unlike yesterday there was little open water, the ice was rammed up all along the coast. We did manage to find a Brunnich's Guillemot, and enjoyed some nice flocks of Black Scoter, then continued our journey down the coast. Unfortunately there was too much ice to find any more birds on the sea, and the Sika seemed to have taken over most of the land along the coast, so we proceeded to our night stop at Nemuro.

We spent a day making a thorough exploration of the coasts around the fascinating Nemuro peninsula. We visited a selection of harbours up and down the coast, and scanned the ocean from various points including Cape Nosappu. We saw a range of great birds, with some good close views of Harlequin Ducks, dapper Long-tailed Ducks, Black Scoters uttering their mournful whistles, Common Goldeneye, Goosander, and Red-breasted Mergansers, and Red-necked, Horned and Black-necked Grebes. A Pacific Diver dodged fishing boats in one of the harbours, and on the sea off the Cape we saw good numbers of Ancient Murrelets, a few Pigeon Guillemot, plenty of Pelagic Cormorants, a Black Brant, and had a great view of a Sea Otter. Land birds were few though we had a nice encounter with a flock of Grey-bellied Bullfinches feeding at the roadside.



Asian Rosy Finch



Short-eared Owl

Our final morning on Hokkaido was one of the most beautiful, as we drove in the early morning across a sunlit landscape festooned with hoar frost, reaching Cape Kiritappu just in time to catch a flock of 25 Asian Rosy Finches feeding on a snow free slope by the road. Explorations around the Cape revealed the sea to be mostly free of birds, but we found a lovely Short-eared Owl hunting over the snowy grassland, and as we drove across nearby marshes we found two Rough-legged Buzzards sitting in bushes – until we stopped the minibuses and they swiftly departed! We reached Kushiro airport and flew back to Tokyo for the night.

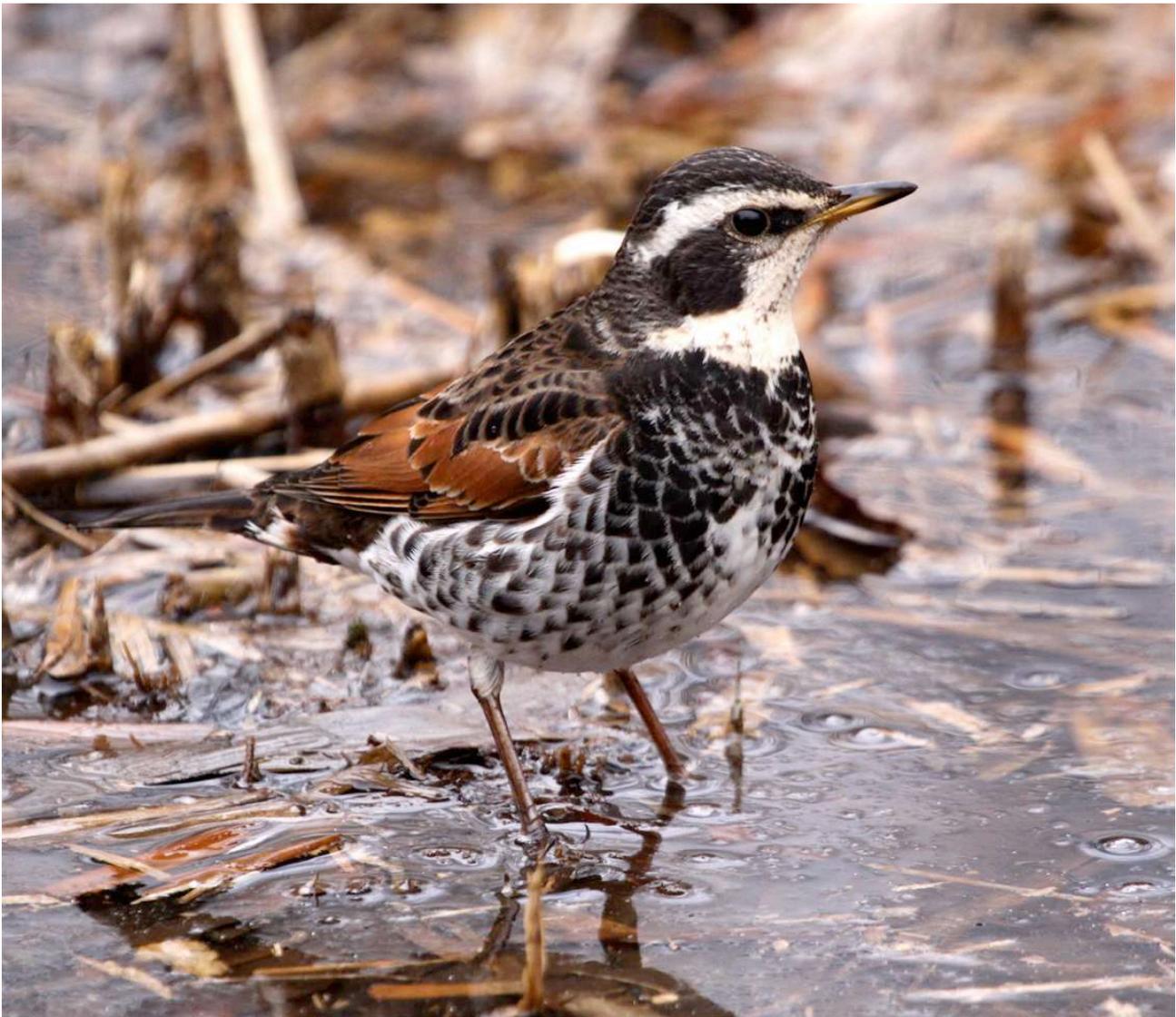
Some of our number were continuing on our extension, so after bidding farewell to those returning home, the rest of us made our way through the Tokyo transport system to Maioka Park. Here we spent several hours waiting for Eastern Water Rail, however it only emerged for a brief glimpse for some of us. There were plenty of other birds about, such as Northern Goshawk, Hawfinch, Japanese Green Woodpecker, a Brown-headed Thrush among many Dusks, and in the late afternoon two Eurasian Woodcock emerged from the shadows (immediately after the departure of a local birder who had waited seven hours for them without success!) We travelled back across Tokyo to the ferry port, and then boarded our ship in the late evening amid warnings of a bumpy ride ahead!

It was a rough night, the ship bumping into the oncoming storm, and by dawn we reached the island of Miyakejima that was capped with a black cloud, the decks of the ship lashed with hard rain. The decision

was made to turn the ship here and begin heading back to Tokyo, the weather too rough to land on any other islands. Nevertheless, we were now in the prime seabird area, and almost as soon as it was light enough to see, we saw our first Albatross – an adult Short-tailed! As we headed northwards into the 'Oshima Triangle' (the name given by birders to this patch of ocean) the weather remained rather foul, though happily the bumpy ride southwards had been replaced by a much smoother passage. As the squalls of rain blew in, so did the birds, and within a couple of hours we had seen many Short-tailed Albatross, plus smaller numbers of Black-footed and Laysan Albatross. Happily the weather was just right for Tristram's Storm Petrels, and they appeared all around with a minimum of 100+ seen, some coming nice and close. The sea then calmed down until we were in the entrance to Tokyo Bay, where Laysan Albatross numbers picked up, plus we saw Pomarine Skua, Black-legged Kittiwake and Northern Fulmar, the weather improving continually as we headed back into Tokyo. Now with an afternoon to spare, we headed across town to Kasai Park where we saw many Greater Scaup, Great Crested and Black-necked Grebes, a sleeping Black-faced Spoonbill and a nice flock of Azure-winged Magpies. Returning to our Tokyo hotel, we enjoyed a buffet dinner and an open bar and congratulated ourselves on a serendipitous trip around this lovely country.



Eurasian Woodcock



Dusky Thrush

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 only recorded by the leader are indicated by the symbol (LO)

Species which were not personally recorded by the leaders are indicated by the symbol (NL)

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

Taiga Bean Goose ◊ *Anser fabalis* A good fifty or so at Katano Kamo Ike. See note.

Tundra Bean Goose ◊ *Anser serrirostris* Several emerged from the woods at Katano Kamo Ike. See note.

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* Just a handful seen in the Kaga area.

Black Brant ◊ *Branta [bernicla] nigricans* A single flew past Cape Nosappu.

Bewick's Swan ◊ *Cygnus [colombianus] bewickii* A nice group of 56 birds in fields near Kaga.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* Several groups seen on Hokkaido, also seen at Kaga and Arasaki.
Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* In good number at Yatsushiro, Arasaki and Hitotsuse.
Mandarin Duck ◇ *Aix galericulata* Nervous flocks seen at Kogawa dam and at Koda.
Gadwall *Anas strepera* Seen at Lake Toden, Kaga and at Kasai Park in Tokyo.
Falcated Duck ◇ *Anas falcata* Good numbers at Kaga, also seen on Hokkaido at Hashirikotan.
Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope* Seen in good numbers at many locations, few on Hokkaido.
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* Great to see lots of really wild birds.
Eastern Spot-billed Duck *Anas zonorhyncha* Commonly encountered on Honshu and Kyushu.
Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* Seen in numbers at Kaga and Koda.
Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* Seen in number in several places, most numerous at Arasaki.
Baikal Teal ◇ *Anas formosa* Just 130+ lurking at the back of the pond at Katano Kamo-Ike. See note.
Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* Frequently encountered.
Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* Recorded at several localities, numerous at Kasai Park.
Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* Scattered sightings along our route.
Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* Plenty noted around the harbours in Hokkaido, and in big numbers at Kasai Park.
Harlequin Duck ◇ *Histrionicus histrionicus* Plenty seen around the Hokkaido coast, many good views acquired.
Stejneger's Scoter ◇ *Melanitta [deglanid] stejnegeri* Quite a few seen off Notsuke but few elsewhere.
Black Scoter ◇ *Melanitta americana* Hundreds on the coasts of Hokkaido, uttering their eerie whistles. See note.



Black Scoter



Pacific Diver

Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis* In good number around the coasts of Hokkaido, numerous at Notsuke.
Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* Some nice examples on Hokkaido, in small groups along the coasts.
Smew ◇ *Mergellus albellus* Six seen at Lake Toden, a trio at Katano Kamo Ike, including some fine drakes.
Goosander (Common Merganser) *Mergus merganser* Seen often on Hokkaido, also at Toden and Kanazawa.
Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* Several at Yatsushiro, many more around the Hokkaido coasts.
Chinese Bamboo Partridge ◇ (introduced) *Bambusicola thoracicus* (H) Heard at Koda and Maioka Park.
Copper Pheasant ◇ *Syrmaticus soemmerringii* A male and four females seen at Karuizawa.
Green Pheasant ◇ *Phasianus versicolor* At least five seen near Karuizawa, another five around Kaga.
Red-throated Loon (R-t Diver) *Gavia stellata* A couple off Kaga, another on Hokkaido.
Black-throated Loon ◇ (B-t Diver) *Gavia arctica* 30+ seen off Kaga was a nice surprise, also singles off Hokkaido.
Pacific Loon ◇ (P Diver) *Gavia pacifica* 3 off Kaga, a few off Nosappu and a single in a harbour near Nemuro.
Laysan Albatross ◇ *Phoebastria immutabilis* Some 20+ seen on the extension, some well into Tokyo Bay.
Black-footed Albatross ◇ *Phoebastria nigripes* No more than 10 seen on the extension.
Short-tailed Albatross ◇ *Phoebastria albatrus* 25+ on the extension, with many juvenile birds seen. See note.
Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* A single seen sat on the water on the extension.
Streaked Shearwater ◇ *Calonectris leucomelas* Scattered birds on the extension, in the low hundreds.
Tristram's Storm Petrel ◇ *Oceanodroma tristrami* At least 100+ on the extension, bad weather bringing them in.
Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* Widespread sightings along our route.
Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena* A couple off Kaga, a few more seen on the Hokkaido coasts.
Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* Singles along the Kyushu coast, a thousand at Kasai Park.

Horned Grebe (Slavonian G) *Podiceps auritus* Four seen in harbours along the Hokkaido coast.

Black-necked Grebe (Eared G) *Podiceps nigricollis* A few along the Kyushu and Hokkaido coasts, more at Kasai.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* At least four seen at Arasaki.

Black-faced Spoonbill ◊ *Platalea minor* A total of fifteen birds seen. See note.

Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax* A couple of singles seen in Kyushu.

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* Numerous on Kyushu, a few on Honshu.

Great Egret *Ardea alba* Seen often on Kyushu and Honshu.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* Seen in number at Arasaki and Kadogawa.

Pacific Reef Heron *Egretta sacra* Nice looks at eight or more at Kadogawa, all slaty-grey plumaged birds.

Pelagic Cormorant ◊ *Phalacrocorax pelagicus* Some seen off Kaga, numerous around the Hokkaido coast.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* Regularly encountered along our route, except on Hokkaido.

Japanese Cormorant ◊ (Temminck's C) *Phalacrocorax capillatus* A number seen at Kaga and Kadogawa.

Western Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* Numerous along the Kyushu coasts.

Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Nisaetus nipalensis* One seen soaring at Karuizawa.

Greater Spotted Eagle *Clanga clanga* A vagrant juvenile bird showed well at Hitotsuse.



Short-tailed Albatross



Greater Spotted Eagle

Japanese Sparrowhawk *Accipiter gularis* (LO) One seen by Otani at Kogawa.

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* One over Maioka Park on the extension.

Eastern Marsh Harrier *Circus spilonotus* A single seen near Kaga, another at Arasaki.

Black-eared Kite *Milvus [migrans] lineatus* Seen on every day of the main tour.

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* Many seen on Hokkaido, 75+ on the 'Eagle Cruise'.

Steller's Sea Eagle ◊ *Haliaeetus pelagicus* Fantastic birds on Hokkaido, also 75+ on the 'Eagle Cruise'. See note.

Rough-legged Buzzard ◊ *Buteo lagopus* Two seen at Kiritappu were a nice surprise (a Japan tick for T/L!)

Eastern Buzzard ◊ (Japanese B) *Buteo japonicus* Frequent encounters along the way, but few in Kyushu.

Brown-cheeked Rail ◊ (Eastern Water R) *Rallus indicus* Heard at Arasaki, a glimpse at Maioka Park.

Ruddy-breasted Crake *Porzana fusca* A total of six calling at Arasaki, one glimpsed plus another that showed well.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* A few scattered sightings.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* Noted in various places in Honshu and Kyushu.

Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis* At least five at Arasaki.

White-naped Crane ◊ *Grus vipio* Lovely beasts at Arasaki, but few in number, some already returned? See note.

Red-crowned Crane ◊ (Japanese C) *Grus japonensis* Plenty of good encounters with these. See note.

Common Crane *Grus grus* A couple in the Crane flocks at Arasaki.

Hooded Crane ◊ *Grus monacha* The most numerous Crane at Arasaki, too many to count! See note.

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* A fair number at Arasaki, also some at Hitotsuse.

Grey-headed Lapwing ◊ *Vanellus cinereus* Three seen in roadside fields at Kaga.

Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* A couple of hundred at Yatsushiro, a couple of dozen at Hitotsuse.

Long-billed Plover ◇ *Charadrius placidus* Two at Lake Toden, four at Kanazawa and two at Satsuma.
Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* Three in a paddy at Yatsushiro.
Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* A flock of several dozen at Yatsushiro,
Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* Lovely looks at two in Maioka Park on the extension.
Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* Many at Arasaki, a few singles elsewhere, including one at Maioka Park.
Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus* A nice one in paddies at Arasaki, a scarce but regular visitor.
Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* Five on the sand bar at Hitotsuse.
Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* Nine together at Yatsushiro.
Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* A handful seen at Arasaki and Satsuma.
Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus* A nice look at a couple of these at Yatsushiro, a write-in for this tour.
Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* A few birds seen around Kyushu.
Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii* Odd birds were seen zipping about at Arasaki.
Long-toed Stint *Calidris subminuta* A single in paddies at Arasaki was rather unusual.
Dunlin *Calidris alpina* Many at Yatsushiro, also at Arasaki and Hitotsuse, also a flock on drifting ice in Hokkaido!
Black-legged Kittiwake *Rissa tridactyla* One off Kaga, several from the ship on the extension.
Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* Several at Yatsushiro, many around Tokyo.
Saunders's Gull ◇ *Chroicocephalus saundersi* At least 25+ of these at Yatsushiro, six at Hitotsuse. See note.



Saunders's Gull



Glaucous Gull

Black-tailed Gull ◇ *Larus crassirostris* Seen off Kaga, also along the Kyushu coasts, and in Tokyo Bay.
Kamchatka Gull ◇ *Larus [canus] kamtschatschensis* A few noted around the Hokkaido coast, not numerous.
Glaucous-winged Gull ◇ *Larus glaucescens* Many seen on Hokkaido, in all plumages.
Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus* A feature of the Hokkaido 'Eagle Boat', visible and abundant.
Vega Gull ◇ (East Siberian G) *Larus vegae* A few around the coasts of Kyushu, many around Tokyo.
Slaty-backed Gull ◇ *Larus schistisagus* Very numerous on Hokkaido, a few elsewhere.
Heuglin's Gull ◇ *Larus [fuscus] heuglini* At least three yellow-legged birds seen at Yatsushiro. See note.
Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus* Three birds seen in the mouth of Tokyo Bay on the extension.
Thick-billed Murre ◇ (Brunnich's Guillemot) *Uria lomvia* A single off Notsuke on our second visit.
Pigeon Guillemot ◇ *Cephus columba* At least 3 off Cape Nosappu, all dark birds of the race *snowii*. See note.
Spectacled Guillemot ◇ *Cephus carbo* Hordes of these along the edge of the pack ice at Notsuke.
Ancient Murrelet ◇ *Synthliboramphus antiquus* 29 off Kaga, many close in at Cape Nosappu, also at Notsuke.
Japanese Murrelet ◇ *Synthliboramphus wumizusume* Up to 11 birds seen at Kadogawa, delightful! See note.
Least Auklet ◇ *Aethia pusilla* 'Best-ever' views of numerous birds along the edge of the pack ice at Notsuke.
Rhinoceros Auklet ◇ *Cerorhinca monocerata* At least seven seen off the Kaga coastline.
Rock Dove (feral) *Columba livia* Allegedly...
Oriental Turtle Dove (Rufous T D) *Streptopelia orientalis* In good number on Kyushu and Honshu.
White-bellied Green Pigeon ◇ (Japanese G P) *Treron sieboldii* Thirteen seen in woodland on Kyushu.
Blakiston's Fish Owl ◇ *Bubo blakistoni* One seen at Rausu, eventually coming to feed in a very snowy landscape.
Ural Owl ◇ *Strix uralensis* A pair seen at roost near Kushiro, also heard at Rausu. See note.

Short-eared Owl *Asio flammeus* A lovely example watched hunting at Kiritappu.
House Swift *Apus nipalensis* (NL) Seen at Totsuka station in Tokyo.
Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* Regularly encountered.
Crested Kingfisher *Megaceryle lugubris* Two birds seen along the river at Satsuma.
Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker ◊ *Dendrocopos kizuki* Often heard, a few seen at Karuizawa.
White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos* One at Mi-ike was a pain to see, another briefly at Akan.
Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* Regular sightings along our route.
Japanese Green Woodpecker ◊ *Picus awokera* A range of views at Karuizawa, Mi-ike, and Maioka Park.
Common Kestrel (Eurasian K) *Falco tinnunculus* Odd birds encountered along our route.
Merlin *Falco columbarius* A female seen perched in a field at Kaga.
Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* Six sightings, from all three islands.
Ryukyu Minivet ◊ *Pericrocotus tegimae* One at Kogawa, more at Mi-ike and Koda, but they played hard to get.
Bull-headed Shrike ◊ *Lanius bucephalus* Regular encounters with this smart bird on Honshu and Kyushu.
Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* Smart examples of the race *japonicus* at Karuizawa and Nagano.
Azure-winged Magpie ◊ (Asian A-w M) *Cyanopica cyanus* Some distant views near Karuizawa, better at Kasai.
Daurian Jackdaw ◊ *Coloelus dauuricus* Oddly just a single, an adult in smart pied plumage.



Daurian Jackdaw



Azure-winged Magpie

Oriental Rook ◊ *Corvus [frugilegus] pastinator* A flock at Yatsushiro, many at Arasaki.
Oriental Crow ◊ *Corvus [corone] orientalis* Frequently seen, in some places the most numerous Crow.
Large-billed Crow *Corvus [macrorhynchus] japonensis* Seen every day of the tour.
Japanese Waxwing ◊ *Bombycilla japonica* At least 24 seen at Karuizawa, with another six briefly in the village.
Coal Tit *Periparus ater* Seen at Karuizawa, Nagano and Tsurui.
Japanese Varied Tit ◊ *Sittiparus [varius] varius* Seen well at Karuizawa, also at Mi-ike.
Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris* Many seen visiting feeders at Tsurui, difficult to count!
Willow Tit *Poecile montanus* Not uncommon at Karuizawa.
Japanese Tit ◊ *Parus minor* Seen on all three islands, most numerously at Karuizawa.
Chinese Penduline Tit ◊ *Remiz consobrinus* A flock of eleven at Arasaki, followed by another two there.
Japanese Skylark ◊ *Alauda japonica* Common at Arasaki, also seen at Yatsushiro.
Brown-eared Bulbul ◊ *Hypsipetes amaurotis* Frequently observed, even a small number on Hokkaido.
Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Many feeding over the lake and fields at Koda.
Asian House Martin *Delichon dasypus* Two flocks seen in the Izumi area.
Japanese Bush Warbler ◊ *Horornis diphone* Several views acquired at Arasaki and elsewhere.
Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* Seen in number at Karuizawa, also at Kogawa and Mi-ike. See note.
Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis* A couple seen at Arasaki.
Chinese Hwamei (introduced) *Garrulax canorus* Several seen near Karuizawa, also at Maioka Park where vocal.
Japanese White-Eye *Zosterops japonicus* A few seen in Kyushu and also in Tokyo parks.
Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* A single at Mi-ike.
Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* Some seen at Karuizawa and Mi-ike, race *fumigatus*.

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* Several at Karuizawa, one at Mi-ike and three at Tsurui. See note.
Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris* A single at Karuizawa.
White-cheeked Starling ◇ *Spodiopsar cineraceus* Frequently seen in small flocks on Honshu and Kyushu.
Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* A flock of 20 at Arasaki.
Pale Thrush ◇ *Turdus pallidus* A small number seen on Honshu, more regular on Kyushu.
Brown-headed Thrush ◇ *Turdus chrysolaus* A single at Maioka Park in Tokyo.
Dusky Thrush ◇ *Turdus eunomus* Fairly common, and seen on every day bar one!
Red-flanked Bluetail *Tarsiger cyanurus* A few seen at Karuizawa and also in the Kyushu woodlands.
Daurian Redstart *Phoenicurus aureus* Seen rather commonly in Kyushu, a few seen on Honshu.
Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius* A few seen around the Kyushu coasts.
Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasii* Seen well at Karuizawa, also at Kanazawa and at Kogawa.
Russet Sparrow *Passer rutilans* Some big flocks seen at Yatsushiro, Arasaki and Satsuma.
Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* Frequent around human habitation.
Japanese Accentor ◇ *Prunella rubida* One at the feeders at Karuizawa, another two on roadsides nearby.
Forest Wagtail *Dendronanthus indicus* A returning wintering bird seen walking about at Mi-ike.
Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* Frequently noted in Kyushu.
Black-backed Wagtail ◇ *Motacilla [alba] lugens* Seen often on Kyushu and Honshu.
Japanese Wagtail ◇ *Motacilla grandis* Several seen on different rivers on Kyushu and Honshu, also one at Rausu.
Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni* Several seen at a range of wooded sites in Kyushu.
Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus* A single flying bird at Arasaki.
Buff-bellied Pipit *Anthus rubescens* Numerous at Arasaki, a few noted elsewhere.
Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla* A largish flock at Karuizawa, 10+ feeding on the ground at Mi-ike.
Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* A single perched near Karuizawa, two seen well at Maioka Park.
Japanese Grosbeak ◇ *Eophona personata* First seen at Karuizawa, then at several points around Kyushu.
Grey-bellied Bullfinch ◇ *Pyrrhula [pyrrhula] griseiventris* Multiple sightings on Honshu and Hokkaido.



Yellow-throated Bunting



Asian Rosy Finch

Asian Rosy Finch ◇ *Leucosticte arctoa* Great looks at 25+ in the sunshine at Cape Kiritappu. See note.
Long-tailed Rosefinch ◇ *Carpodacus sibiricus* Several seen well in the Karuizawa area, another at Tsurui.
Pallas's Rosefinch ◇ *Carpodacus roseus* Two groups of four seen at the roadside on Hokkaido. Superb!
Grey-capped Greenfinch (Oriental G) *Chloris sinica* Seen often, at Yatsushiro and Arasaki in big numbers.
Common Redpoll ◇ *Acanthis flammea* A couple near Lake Furen, a flock of nine at Kiritappu.
Eurasian Siskin *Spinus spinus* Several seen around Karuizawa, also a single at Mi-ike.
Meadow Bunting ◇ *Emberiza cioides* Regularly encountered in Honshu and Kyushu, most seen at Karuizawa.
Chestnut-eared Bunting ◇ *Emberiza fucata* Quite a few of these smart birds seen in the fields of Arasaki.
Rustic Bunting ◇ *Emberiza rustica* Numerous in the Karuizawa area, also seen at Koda.
Yellow-throated Bunting ◇ (Elegant B) *Emberiza elegans* Seen at Kogawa, Mi-ike and Koda, with smart males.
Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala* Seen often in Kyushu, a few in Tokyo parks.

Grey Bunting ◊ *Emberiza variabilis* Two shadows glimpsed at Kogawa, also heard at Koda...
Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* Plenty at Arasaki, singles elsewhere.

MAMMALS

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

Pallas's Squirrel (introduced) *Callosciurus erythraeus* Numerous at Maioka Park.

Japanese Giant Flying Squirrel *Petaurista leucogenys* A great look at one peeking out of a box at Karuizawa.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* Seen daily on Hokkaido, with one very friendly one at Notsuke.

Raccoon-Dog *Nyctereutes procyonoides* Two seen, one in the car headlights at Mi-ike, one near Karuizawa.

Harbour Seal (Common S) *Phoca vitulina* Several seen off Cape Nosappu.

Sea Otter *Enhydra lutris* One seen well off Cape Nosappu, possibly two there.

Siberian Weasel *Mustela sibirica* One seen well at Arasaki, another on the motorway near Mi-ike.

Japanese Macaque *Macaca fuscata* A group seen at Karuizawa, many by the hot tub near Nagano!

Sika Deer *Cervus nippon* A few near Karuizawa, and reaching pest proportions on Hokkaido!

Japanese Serow *Capricornis crispus* Two seen in the forests in the Karuizawa area.



Japanese Giant Flying Squirrel

NOTES TO THE SYSTEMATIC LIST

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>.

Taiga Bean Goose *Anser fabalis*

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

Tundra Bean Goose *Anser rossicus*

These birds of the *serrirostris* race were alongside the previous species on the pond at Katano Kamo-ike, though were definitely in the minority. 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

Baikal Teal *Anas formosa*

A swarm of 130+ 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!

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>

Short-tailed Albatross *Phoebastria albatrus*

Good numbers seen on our pelagic extension, with an estimated 25+ 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*

Five at Yatsushiro, two at Arasaki, seven at Hitotsuse, one at Kasai Park. The Black-faced Spoonbill is a globally threatened species listed as 'Endangered' by Birdlife. The total population as counted in the 2012 census is 2693 birds, with an estimated 1600 being adults.

Steller's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus*

The concentrations of this huge beast in eastern Hokkaido are undoubtedly one of the world's greatest avian spectacles, with the 'Nature Cruise' into the pack-ice being 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 fewer than usual 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.

Red-crowned Crane (Japanese C) *Grus japonensis*

Surely one of the most beautiful birds in the world. We enjoyed these showing their full range of dancing, prancing and bugling on the sparkling snow, with our first ones at Akan that were getting mugged by Eagles, at dawn in the Setsurigawa River roost where a stampede made the flock fly over our heads, then we watched them in the fields at Tsurui. 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.

Hooded Crane *Grus monacha*

A stunning spectacle at Arasaki, where as many as 10,000 birds are estimated to be present. The official total population estimate is only 11500, and it is listed by Birdlife as 'Vulnerable', because of its reliance on just a few wintering sites. It breeds in such remote parts of south-east Siberia that its nest went undiscovered till 1974!

Saunders's Gull *Saundersilarus saundersi*

Good views of up to 25+ birds along the strand 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 or dipping into the shallow water. With a total world population estimated at only 7,100-9,600 birds, it is currently listed by Birdlife as 'Vulnerable'.

Heuglin's Gull *Larus heuglini*

Two 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'.

Pigeon Guillemot *Cephus columba*

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. Despite the drizzle and the murk, the sea was calm and we found as many as eleven of these, mostly in pairs, bobbing around close to our boat. 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 pair of roosting birds in the daytime on Hokkaido. These obviously pale birds are of the *japonica* race.

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius*

At Karuizawa and at the Snow Monkey Park we saw the race *japonicus*.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

On Honshu the race concerned is *trivirgatus*, on Kyushu we saw birds of the race *kiusiuensis*.

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

At Karuizawa we saw birds of the race *hondoensis*, at Mi-ike on Kyushu we saw one 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 25+ seen feeding by the road at Kiritappu were much appreciated. The race concerned is *brunneonucha*, which breeds in eastern Siberia and the Kuril Islands.



Hooded & Sandhill Cranes



Sika



White-tailed Eagles



Red-crowned Cranes



Great Egrets & Eurasian Spoonbill