

# THE KURILS, THE COMMANDERS & KAMCHATKA

5/8 – 22 JUNE 2007

## TOUR REPORT

**LEADER:** MARK BEAMAN

It had been a very long time since our pioneering and 'one-and-only' tour to the Kuril Islands, the Commander Islands and Kamchatka back in 1993, but it was wonderful to see that this part of the world remains, to a very large degree, an untouched and starkly beautiful wilderness. The alcids are surely the crowning avian glory of this part of the world. We saw no less than 13 species, all of those possible on this itinerary, including Common, Brünnich's, Pigeon and Spectacled Guillemots, Long-billed and Ancient Murrelets, Crested, Least, Parakeet and Rhinoceros Auklets, and Horned and Tufted Puffins. The star of stars, Whiskered Auklet, was seen by the thousand, and we even visited a colony and saw the birds just a few metres away! A great supporting cast of marine species included Pacific and Yellow-billed Divers, Laysan Albatross, Mottled Petrel, Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel, Temminck's and Red-faced Cormorants, Harlequin Duck, Stejneger's Scoter, Black-tailed, Kamchatka and Slaty-backed Gulls, Red-legged Kittiwake and Aleutian Tern. Landbirds also included some highly sought-after species, notably the extraordinary Steller's Sea Eagle, not to mention Falcated Duck, Rock Sandpiper, Latham's Snipe, Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, Pechora Pipit, the gorgeous Japanese Robin, Rufous-tailed Robin, Siberian and Brown-headed Thrushes, Japanese Bush Warbler, Middendorff's and Sakhalin Grasshopper Warblers, Sakhalin Leaf Warbler, Narcissus Flycatcher, Long-tailed Rosefinch, Grey-bellied Bullfinch, and Grey and Rustic Buntings. A total of 149 bird species was recorded. We also observed 16 species of mammal: seals and cetaceans were very well represented, the latter including Great Sperm Whale, Northern Minke Whale, Sei Whale, Fin Whale and Killer Whale!

Sakhalin, with its endless forested hills, lakes and farmlands looked much the same from the air as when I last visited, many years ago, but the huge new gas terminal near Korsakov could be seen from the aircraft windows as we began our descent after the long overnight flight from Moscow. Fork-tailed (or Pacific) Swifts and Black-backed Wagtails greeted us at the airport and we were soon on our way into the island's capital, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk ('South Sakhalin'). In the city the main changes seemed to be in the copious, brightly advertized shops and nightclubs. Oil and gas money had come

to town, but I was fascinated to see that the improvements only extended to the facades of the hotels. Behind the facade the rooms were almost as simple as in Soviet days and their aftermath!

We had more than two full days to explore the southern end of the island before the cruise started, so we were soon out in the forest trying to find birds. Unusually for Sakhalin, there was a heat wave on, so the woods were hot and still in mid-afternoon so we had to be content with just a few species, including some cracking male Narcissus Flycatchers, Japanese Tit, Oriental and Large-billed Crows, and Black-faced Bunting.

Next day we set out early for Zaliv Aniva, a huge bay at the southern end of Sakhalin. Our progress towards the coast came to an abrupt halt soon after I heard a Sakhalin Grasshopper Warbler (now split from Gray's Grasshopper Warbler) calling from some roadside herbage. (The call is so loud that it even penetrated our Russian bus!) It was a pretty uncooperative individual unfortunately, so views were very brief. We would just have to keep trying. The stop provided a great introduction to Sakhalin birds, however, with Oriental Turtle Dove, Oriental Cuckoo, Olive-backed Pipit, Brown-headed Thrush, the noisy Japanese Bush Warbler, Pallas's Leaf and Radde's Warblers, and Grey-capped Greenfinch all being seen. Nearer to the coast, we stopped at a river where a much more obliging Sakhalin Grasshopper Warbler performed for us and where Japanese Buzzard, Rufous-tailed Robin (for some), Black-browed Reed Warbler, male Russet Sparrow and four beautiful Long-tailed Rosefinches were other prime attractions.

At Zaliv Aniva most migrant shorebirds and wildfowl had long since gone on north, but we watched small numbers of Red-throated Divers and a single Black-throated Diver, as well as some 40 Stejneger's Scoters (split from Velvet) and many Black-tailed and Slaty-backed Gulls. In the grassy slacks behind the beach, Latham's Snipes were sitting on the telephone poles, from time to time carrying out their spectacular dive-bombing display flights, which included a loud, dive-bomber style 'whoosh' as they plunged towards the ground. A few raptors included two Black-eared Kites and the first of six White-tailed Eagles we were to record today. Passerines included the very handsome Green-headed Wagtail, Siberian Stonechat and a number of Middendorff's Grasshopper Warblers, one of which gave us superb views. Later in the day we continued southwards to the Korsakov area where four Temminck's Cormorants and loads of Pelagic Cormorants frequented the rocky coastline and a total of 24 colourful, but at times surprisingly cryptic, Harlequin Ducks were to be seen. A first-summer Glaucous Gull was a lingering winter visitor. The Sea of Okhotsk has a virtually endemic, largely ice-dwelling seal, the Largha Seal, and we came across over 120 during our explorations today.

On our second full day we concentrated at first on the island's hill forests. Some of us set off early to look for nocturnal and crepuscular species. A pair of Ural Owls were heard but failed to show themselves, although Eurasian Woodcock was more obliging. As the light level increased the forest was full of birdsong, very different from yesterday afternoon, and we came across some very showy Rufous-tailed Robins singing from the tops of conifers, Northern Red-flanked Bluetail, Sakhalin Leaf Warbler and Grey-bellied Bullfinch. A male Siberian Thrush put on a great performance for us, but was pipped at the post by a lovely male Japanese Robin that we found singing in a small valley. Later in the day we explored a large coastal lagoon where a first-summer Kamchatka Gull was a welcome addition to the list, as were some rather distant Aleutian Terns. We also found an Alaska Wagtail here and a Whimbrel of the northeast Siberian form *variegatus*, which looked extremely like *hudsonicus* (Hudsonian Whimbrel) and perhaps should be lumped with that form when *hudsonicus* is treated as specifically distinct.

We did not have much time on our last morning, but as we had largely dipped on Grey Bunting to date (only Janice having spotted one yesterday) we tried climbing up one of the low mountains to a well known area for this species. The views were fantastic, but sadly the buntings were in skulking

mode and only Mark and Werner saw any (three males between them). We were going to have to rely on the Kurils for this elusive species. Werner added to his tally by continuing to the summit and finding two Japanese Accentors.

By early afternoon we were aboard the *Professor Khromov* (called 'Spirit of Enderby' by Heritage Expeditions, the cruise operators), a Russian research ship converted for adventure tourism, and getting to know the layout of our floating home for the next 13 days. By late afternoon we were heading out of the harbour and turning southwards to round the southeastern tip of Sakhalin, on our way to the distant Kuril Islands. Some new birds greeted us as we left, including Pacific Diver, a number of Short-tailed Shearwaters, Common Guillemot, a nice Spectacled Guillemot (a species endemic to the Sea of Okhotsk), a party of Crested Auklets, a lone Rhinoceros Auklet and a single Long-billed Murrelet. This latter was right beside the ship and provided good views to all those present at the time. Little were we to know that this was to be the only close sighting of the cruise!

The fabulous and unusual weather continued as we sailed towards the Kurils. Next day the sea was like glass and thousand upon thousand of Short-tailed Shearwaters were watched sailing over the surface or forming huge rafts, some of which we disturbed as we steamed southeastwards. Northern Fulmars were also common, although nothing like as numerous as the shearwaters. Most were of the rather dingy north Pacific dark morph, with only one pale morph recorded out of 500 birds seen (this very low ratio was to continue throughout the cruise). Pale grey, rather ghostly Fork-tailed Storm-Petrels were regularly to be seen and we also had a solitary Leach's Storm-Petrel, four Red-necked Phalaropes, small numbers of Ancient Murrelets, lots of Rhinoceros Auklets and the first of many Tufted Puffins. A migrant Siberian Rubythroat female even landed on the ship during the crossing. Eventually the looming volcanoes of Ostrov Iturup hove into view and as we approached this large island we learned that we would have time to visit the flooded caldera at Livinya Past (the 'Lion's Mouth' in Russian), which turned out to be a scenic treat. After passing some seabird-thronged islets at the mouth, the *Khromov* steamed right into the spectacular, steep-sided caldera, covered in grass, scrub and low trees. A strong 'catabatic' wind was blowing, but as we reached a more sheltered part of the caldera this diminished and we were even able to set up our 'scopes on the deck when four Brown Bears were sighted foraging near to the shore. They looked huge! Must have been as big as many 'grizzlies' in North America.

It was foggy next morning and it was impossible to see anything of Ostrov Kunashir, although Rodney Russ the Expedition Leader assured us we were anchored not far offshore! This was our first chance to use the zodiac and naiaid inflatables, and the calm sea made it all too easy getting down the gangway and into the boats. We all followed the lead boat (with the GPS) through the fog and then, all of a sudden, there was the grassy coastline and a Russian staff member from the Zapovednika Kurilskiy (Kuril Nature Reserve) waiting for us. We waited about on the beach, where a migrant Grey-tailed Tattler and a nice male Siberian Rubythroat were found, in the hope the fog would lift, as Kunashir is prime bear country. Luckily the weather gradually cleared and before too long we set off on a hike through the attractive mixed forest. Here we found Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker (surprisingly missed on Sakhalin), Asian Brown Flycatcher and, for some, Grey-streaked Flycatcher and Eastern Crowned Warbler. White-tailed Eagles were quite common and we enjoyed some splendid views of these huge birds.

During the afternoon we explored another area where a Crested Kingfisher and a pair of Bull-headed Shrikes were the best finds. We also admired the huge metal dustbins put up (and used earlier in the season) by nesting Blakiston's Fish Owls, but sadly the reserve staff did not know where the owls were roosting in June. As we sailed back towards Iturup we came across both Pomarine and Arctic (or Parasitic) Skuas. Brünnich's Guillemot and Horned Puffin.

We spent a full day exploring Iturup, which is one of the few inhabited islands in the Kurils. Our landing beach at Kurilsk turned up another first-summer Kamchatka Gull and a very scary-looking local guide (what hair!), while the town hosted Russet Sparrows. A visit to a very scenic bay below a huge conical volcano provided chances to watch some very nice Spectacled Guillemots and tempt out a Japanese Robin (we saw two and heard plenty more on this island). Brown-headed Thrushes were more obliging on Iturup than they had been on Sakhalin and we also saw (and heard) our only Lanceolated Warblers here. After lunch at the village of Reydovo, we visited a local headland which I felt sure the local guide chose because it overlooked the port and a large fish factory bedecked in a huge banner proclaiming 'The Kurils are Russian Land!' The issue of the Japanese claim to the southern Kurils is clearly strongly felt on both sides of the debate! An overshooting Asian House Martin was a surprise at this location.

The day's highlight was undoubtedly the chance to bathe in a geothermally-heated river in the volcanic highlands. After a scenic ride by 'truck-bus' (only the Russians could create such utilitarian but effective monsters) into the mountains, with fantastic views of many of Iturup's volcanic peaks, we walked down to the river, finding a number of Arctic Warblers en route. Down at the river several groups of Russians were already enjoying the steaming, sulphurous waters and, of course, beer and vodka. No Russian picnic would be the same without the latter. Most of us joined in the bathing and enjoyed the hot bath temperatures! It was all very relaxing after the hot walk down (yes, the heat wave continued unabated). On the way back some of us saw a couple of Grey Buntings. Of course, in the way of things in Russia, one of the truck-buses broke down for a time, but was soon fixed by those endlessly resourceful Siberians.

A very scenic landing on Ostrov Urup allowed those who wished to climb up onto a high headland that gave fantastic panoramic views across the island and its volcanoes. Of course there was the little matter of the tumbled timber behind the beach which, once hidden in the lush Middendorff's-haunted herbage, was a pretty effective barrier to human progression! Out in the Bay, a couple of Red-faced Cormorants, some Black Scoters and a lone Sea Otter were fishing.

We had sighted three Great Sperm Whales, plus a Yellow-billed Diver that flew right over the ship (!), before landing at Zaliv Natalii on Urup, but during the crossing to Ostrov Chirpoy we came across a further 19 sperm whales, making 22 in total for the day. Some of the sightings were really close, others much more distant, as we crossed what must truly be the 'Sperm Whale Alley' of the planet. After a time we could work out roughly when the whales would dive again after a long series of blows, raising their huge tail flukes vertically into the air before they plunged down again into the deeps in search of squid. Our first five Laysan Albatrosses paid the ship a visit as we steamed northwards, the first of many of these graceful birds.

In the early evening we landed on Ostrov Chirpoy where sea mammals were present in good numbers, including 15 Northern Sea-Lions, five Sea Otters and a few Harbour Seals. Red-faced Cormorants were common here (and would be seen just about everywhere from now on) and amongst the many alcids (Tufted Puffins and Brünnich's Guillemots were the most numerous species) we came across plenty of Pigeon Guillemots of the interesting race *snowi*, which wholly or largely lacks the white wing patch, and, further offshore, our first Whiskered Auklets.

Our first landing on Simushir produced a Eurasian Osprey and the first Glaucous-winged Gull of the cruise, but this was just a forerunner for the main event, a landing in the old Russian submarine base at Bukhta Broutona, another flooded caldera, this time with a narrow entrance, at the north end of the island. Fog enveloped the island as we slowed down to load the inflatables well offshore (it was too deep to anchor), but as we made our way towards land the fog lifted and the entrance to the base was visible. A small freighter was wrecked beside the narrow entrance, which apparently was a tricky one for a submarine to negotiate while submerged! Inside the sky was clear and the buildings of the

base could be discerned, while a Red-necked Grebe was disturbed from the calm waters. We landed at some ruined piers and explored the ruined buildings and then the deciduous and pine scrub that clothed the interior of the island. Here, at last, everyone who wanted caught up on Grey Bunting and we also came across our first Buff-bellied Pipits. Siberian Rubythroats and Arctic Warblers were both very common, singing from old lampposts and the sides of buildings as well as from more traditional perches. Much less expected were six Spotted Nutcrackers, which seemed rather out of place on a scrub-covered volcanic island! The dwarf Siberian Stone Pines must give them enough sustenance.

In total contrast to the well-vegetated islands further south, our next stop was at Yankicha, a small island in the Ushishir group. The weather had well and truly changed now, and cold air and fog became the order of the day. We could tell we were in for a wonderful experience though as thousands and thousands of Crested Auklets, and smaller numbers of Whiskered Auklets, streamed past the anchored ship from first light onwards, chuckling noisily (the Cresteds in particular reminded me of sandgrouse). Luckily the access to the alcid colony on Yankicha was via the sheltered side of the island and soon we were inside yet another flooded caldera. Here the air was full of noise and the volume rose as we approached the far side of the lagoon. We were able to pull up and tie the inflatables onto the rocks at the base of a steep slope where tens of thousands of Crested Auklets were nesting (we estimated 100,000 at this island!), joined by a couple of thousand Whiskered Auklets! Seeing the latter at all is an achievement, but to see so many, and at such close range, was truly extraordinary. The nearest birds, settled on the boulders and grassy slopes, were just a few metres from us. From time to time a marauding gull caused a panic amongst the auklets and a mighty roar arose as many thousand took to the air at once. As time passed, and the danger eased, they progressively alighted until the slope was black with little black birds with strange head plumes and brightly-coloured bills. Wow! This was one of the greatest seabird spectacles I have ever witnessed!

Arctic Foxes were present here, clearly feeding on the auklet eggs or hapless adults (we saw several fall to the ground after mid-air collisions, although they seemed to recover). They were so tame that they stood on the shore right by the boats and even came forward to try and gnaw on the mooring ropes! You could see how they became a nuisance in the Commanders after Bering's ship was wrecked, fearlessly eating the bodies of the dead crew members and even trying to bite fingers and toes from living people! After enjoying the colony to the full we sailed over to an area of vulcanological activity where sulphur vents were spewing forth gases and where the ground was coloured yellow by the emissions. Our exit from the caldera was not quite so easy, however, as the tide had dropped and most of those in the naiads, which have a keel, had to 'volunteer' to wade ashore and then walk along the coast until deeper water was reached!

All too soon it was time to leave fabulous Yankicha, but as we sailed northwards the tidal races were full of Whiskered Auklets (we estimated some 5000 in total!) and we even encountered a male Ribbon Seal. We finished off the day at Ostrov Matua where the Japanese built a large military base after they occupied the northern Kurils during the Second World War (it is said they murdered the Chinese slave labourers that built the place). The Russians had used it after re-occupying the islands at the end of the war, but now the buildings and the old radar equipment for the airfield stood long-abandoned. Offshore, Ancient Murrelets were positively numerous.

An early morning cruise below the bird-thronged cliffs at Ostrov Ekarma was most impressive and as well as huge numbers of fulmars and auks, we enjoyed great views of a pair of Peregrines of the large form *japonensis*. Indeed until we got better looks I was wondering if they were Gyrfalcons! Not far off the cliffs a Northern Minke Whale made its way past us. Later in the day we landed on Ostrov Kharimkotan, although nothing of particular note was found. As we left Kharimkotan behind Leach's Storm-Petrels became quite common and we also came across another Great Sperm Whale rolling on the surface.

We landed next at Bukhta Krasheninnikova at the southwestern end of Ostrov Paramushir. A Grey Bunting male performed well for us here and we watched another large Peregrine, while four smart Long-tailed Ducks were swimming in the shallows. As we sailed out of the bay eight Killer Whales were making their way through the area, the huge dorsal fins of the males being visible from long distances. As we sailed further north the low clouds lifted and most of the spectacular volcanic cone on Ostrov Atlasova, the highest peak in the Kurils, came into view. Another landing followed, reputedly at an old gulag for female prisoners.

We woke up to an unwelcome surprise. A large storm was approaching Kamchatka from the south and the wind was howling out of the north, turning the up-until-now calm seas into an ocean of white caps. Worse still the howling norther had set us back so far in the night that our planned cruise in the fjords of southern Kamchatka was cancelled, and with it the chance to see more Brown Bears and in particular Long-billed Murrelets, which are common close to the coastline. Instead we were to head straight for the Commander Islands, and it was to be slow progress against the wind. Still, Laysan Albatrosses were to be a frequent sight during the crossing and we counted an amazing total of 133 Mottled petrels (a species that spends the southern winter in the North Pacific). The following day, as the wind moderated a little, we sighted two huge Fin Whales and a Sei Whale, as well as 14 Dall's Porpoises (our best count to date).

The low cloud and rain was still with us by the time we reached Ostrov Beringa in the Komandorskiy (or Commander) islands, named after Vitus Bering who was wrecked here in 1741 on his way back from an exploration of the Alaskan coast. We landed at the rather bleak little settlement of Nikolskoye, complete with bust of Bering and a tiny, well-kept museum. Glaucous-winged Gulls were suddenly the dominant species and Rock Sandpipers fed amongst the piles of seaweed, allowing a very close approach. Snow Buntings were nesting in the village and at the river mouth an adult Red-legged Kittiwake could be seen with a resting gull flock. Further inland we came across displaying Pechora Pipits and numerous Lapland Longspurs in their smart breeding dress. All too soon it was time to head back to the ship, but not before admiring some lovely Mongolian Plovers in full breeding plumage.

We spent the afternoon sailing around an offshore island and the northwestern cape of Beringa. Here we encountered good numbers of dainty little Red-legged Kittiwakes and, in spite of the swell, we even managed to get close enough for good photographs. Parakeet Auklets are rather sparse as a breeding bird around the northern end of Beringa, but, with persistence, we eventually record a total of 14. A huge Northern Fur-Seal colony at the northwestern tip of the island must have held around 1000 individuals!

At last we came to the Kamchatka coast, but how sad and frustrating it was to have the cloud level only a few hundred metres above the sea, and all the panoply of Kamchatka's huge, snow-capped volcanoes lost in the murk! Six Pomarine Skuas passed the ship before we came close to land. Here we explored far up the Zhupanovo River with the inflatables, looking in particular for that megaraptor, the marvellous Steller's Sea Eagle. And we were not to be disappointed. Almost as soon as we arrived at the river mouth we saw a couple of adults and then, over the course of our visit, a further eight of these mighty creatures, including both adults and immatures. We came across several nests and some adults perched in trees right at the river's edge, while others flew right over the boats. An amazing experience!

One of the most curious sights of this unusual zodiac cruise were the Harbour Seals gathered on the sandbanks well upstream, presumably attracted by the salmon run. Along the wooded banks we found Common Rosefinches and a smart Rustic Bunting. Back at the river mouth, a superb drake Falcated Duck, two Long-toed Stints, two Far Eastern Curlews, a couple of East Siberian Wagtails and a distant Brown Bear were some of the final highlights, while as we sailed south along the

spectacular coastline a small number of Least Auklets were a welcome bonus, right at the southern edge of the breeding range.

We finished off this highly memorable journey at the city of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy, where five Aleutian Terns were fishing in the huge natural harbour. It was all very sad to leave the ship and in particular all those characters amongst the ship's crew and the expedition staff. They had really made this a very special expedition for all of us.

## SYSTEMATIC LIST

Species which were heard but not seen are indicated by the symbol (H).

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

### GAVIIDAE

Red-throated Loon (Red-throated Diver) *Gavia stellata*: Scattered records of small numbers from southern Sakhalin, the Kurils and the Kamchatka coast.

Black-throated Loon (Arctic Loon, Black-throated Diver) *Gavia arctica*: One in southern Sakhalin and four at the Zhupanovo River.

Pacific Loon (Pacific Diver) *Gavia pacifica*: Scattered records of small numbers from southern Sakhalin, the Kurils and the Kamchatka coast.

Yellow-billed Loon (Yellow-billed Diver) *Gavia adamsii*: One flew over the ship, giving excellent views, off Zaliv Natalii, Ostrov Urup.

### PODICIPEDIDAE

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*: One at Bukhta Broutona, Ostrov Simushir and two at Bukhta Severgina, Ostrov Kharimkotan. In addition, Jeremy saw one off Kurilsk.

### DIOMEDEIDAE

Laysan Albatross *Diomedea immutabilis*: Frequently encountered from the northern end of Ostrov Urup to the seas between Ostrov Bering and Kamchatka. Typically in small or moderate numbers, but 50 as we headed NE towards the Commanders from the southernmost tip of Kamchatka.

### PROCELLARIIDAE

Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*: Numerous from the waters east of southern Sakhalin onwards. Our maximum was 6200 in a day from Ostrov Ekarma to the vicinity of Ostrov Kharimkotan.

Mottled Petrel *Pterodroma inexpectata*: A total of 133 between the southern tip of Kamchatka and Ostrov Bering, and a couple more as we made our way to the Zhupanovo River.

Short-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus tenuirostris*: Often numerous from southern Sakhalin onwards, especially during the crossing from Korsakov to Iturup, during which we saw over 10,000! Often the view was full of these birds, either flying or rafted up on the calm waters. We could easily have overlooked a few Sooty Shearwaters *P. griseus* amongst the hordes.

### HYDROBATIDAE

Fork-tailed Storm-Petrel *Oceanodroma furcata*: 30 between Sakhalin and Iturup, and then fairly common from Ostrov Yankicha onwards, with up to 50 in a day.

Leach's Storm-Petrel *Oceanodroma leucorhoa*: One between Sakhalin and Iturup and then three found on the ship at Ostrov Ekarma, 40 in the vicinity of Ostrov Kharimkotan and six between the southern tip of Sakhalin and Ostrov Beringa.

### PHALACROCORACIDAE

Temminck's Cormorant *Phalacrocorax capillatus*: Four in southern Sakhalin and then fairly common around Ostrov Iturup and Ostrov Kunashir, where we recorded up to 30 in a day.

Pelagic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pelagicus*: Widespread and common, with up to 120 recorded in a day.

Red-faced Cormorant *Phalacrocorax urile*: Common from Ostrov Urup northwards to Ostrov Beringa, with a maximum count of 150 at Ostrov Atlasova.

## ARDEIDAE

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea*: Four in southern Sakhalin.

## ANATIDAE

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*: Six at Ostrov Kunashir, two at Ostrov Iturup and two at Ostrov Yankicha.

Falcatad Duck *Anas falcata*: A fine male at the Zhupanovo River.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: A pair in southern Sakhalin.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*: A female at Ostrov Yankicha.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*: A male in southern Sakhalin.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*: Small numbers in southern Sakhalin and two at Ostrov Atlasova.

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*: Seven in southern Sakhalin, four at Ostrov Chirpoy, 22 at Ostrov Atlasova and a female at Ostrov Beringa.

Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*: Common from southern Sakhalin to Ostrov Beringa, with a maximum count of 60 at Ostrov Matua (and another 10 earlier that day at Ostrov Yankicha).

Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis*: Four (three males and a female) at Ostrov Paramushir.

Black Scoter *Melanitta nigra*: 12 at Ostrov Urup and a male at Ostrov Yankicha. In addition, some of the group saw 10 at Ostrov Kunashir and Jeremy saw one at Ostrov Iturup.

Stejneger's Scoter *Melanitta stejnegeri*: A total of 47 in southern Sakhalin and 80 at Ostrov Kunashir. Elsewhere, Jeremy saw singles at Ostrov Urup and near Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*: Two in southern Sakhalin, six at Ostrov Kharimkotan and two at Ostrov Beringa.

Goosander (Common Merganser) *Mergus merganser*: Two at Ostrov Kunashir, one at Ostrov Paramushir two at the Zhupanovo River. In addition, some group members saw a single at Ostrov Urup.

## ACCIPITRIDAE

Black-eared Kite *Milvus lineatus*: Small numbers in southern Sakhalin.

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*: Fairly common (for a large raptor), with small numbers in southern Sakhalin and through the Kurils as far north as Ostrov Urup.

Steller's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus*: 10 (seven adults and three young birds) at the Zhupanovo River. In addition, Steve saw an adult at Ostrov Urup. This absolutely magnificent creature gave us some fantastic views either perched in riverside trees or flying and soaring right over the boats. Wonderful! A very deserving No.2 in the 'Bird of the Trip' contest.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*: Two singles in southern Sakhalin.

Japanese Buzzard *Buteo japonicus*: One in southern Sakhalin and four in the uplands of Ostrov Iturup.

## PANDIONIDAE

Eurasian Osprey *Pandion cristatus*: A single at Ostrov Simushir. Recent genetic studies support treating the ospreys as four or even five different species.

## FALCONIDAE

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*: A pair clearly nesting at Ostrov Ekarma and singles at Ostrov Paramushir and the Zhupanovo River. All were of the large (almost Gyrfalcon sized, or so it seemed) form *japonensis* that nests in Kamchatka and surrounding regions south to Japan.

## CHARADRIIDAE

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*: Three in southern Sakhalin.

Mongolian Plover *Charadrius mongolus*: Five on Ostrov Beringa were in their breeding finery.

#### SCOLOPACIDAE

Long-toed Stint *Calidris subminuta*: One heard on Ostrov Beringa and then two seen at the Zhupanovo River.

Rock Sandpiper *Calidris ptilocnemis*: 15 on Ostrov Beringa were off the distinctive race *quarta*. They were extremely tame, whether feeding on the weed mounds at the foreshore or on their nesting territories, allowing a very close approach.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina*: About 100 at Ostrov Beringa, where they were by far the commonest wader.

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*: two at Ostrov Beringa and one heard at the Zhupanovo River.

Latham's Snipe *Gallinago hardwickii*: Present in small numbers in southern Sakhalin and on Ostrov Kunashir and Ostrov Iturup. Their dive bombing display flights, complete with loud 'whooshing' sounds were a real marvel to behold.

Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*: One seen and two heard in southern Sakhalin.

Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*: One in southern Sakhalin. Careful study of the photographs show that this individual belonged to the eastern Siberian breeding form *variegatus*, but was definitely at the darker end of the spectrum, with an entirely dark back and rump and very dark underwings. This particular individual closely approached the North American form *hudsonicus* (Hudsonian Whimbrel) and indeed begged the question why is *variegatus* not included with *hudsonicus* as a separate species?

Far Eastern Curlew (Eastern Curlew) *Numenius madagascariensis*: Two at the Zhupanovo River.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos*: One in southern Sakhalin.

Grey-tailed Tattler *Heteroscelus brevipes*: One on the beach at Ostrov Kunashir.

Ruddy Turnstone *Arenaria interpres*: One tried to land on the ship northeast of Ostrov Simushir!

Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*: Four at sea between Sakhalin and Ostrov Iturup.

#### STERCORARIIDAE

Pomarine Jaeger (Pomarine Skua) *Stercorarius pomarinus*: A single off Ostrov Kunashir and 6 off the Zhupanovo River. In addition, two for some of the group off Ostrov Urup.

Parasitic Jaeger (Arctic Skua, Parasitic Skua) *Stercorarius parasiticus*: Scattered records of small numbers from southern Sakhalin to the waters off the Zhupanovo River.

#### LARIDAE

Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus*: Locally common in Sakhalin and Kamchatka. Elsewhere, a single at Ostrov Kunashir and two at Ostrov Iturup.

Black-tailed Gull *Larus crassirostris*: Common in southern Sakhalin, where we recorded up to 40 in a day. The only observation elsewhere was four at Ostrov Iturup.

Kamchatka Gull *Larus kamtschatschensis*: A first-summer individual in southern Sakhalin and another first-summer at Ostrov Iturup.

Slaty-backed Gull *Larus schistisagus*: Widespread and often numerous, with up to 300 recorded in a day. Young Slaty-backs suffer unduly from bleaching and feather wear, creating many confusing attempts at resembling 'white-winged' gulls!

Glaucous-winged Gull *Larus glaucescens*: Scattered ones and twos in the Kurils, from Ostrov Iturup northwards. Very common on Ostrov Beringa, where we observed 160 in a day and singles on the crossings to and from the Commander Islands.

Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*: Two first-summer in southern Sakhalin.

Black-legged Kittiwake: *Rissa tridactyla*: Widespread and locally numerous, with a maximum count of 5000 at Ostrov Chirpoy (plus over 200 in other localities that day).

Red-legged Kittiwake *Rissa brevirostris*: This attractive small gull was greatly outnumbered by Black-legged Kittiwakes at Ostrov Beringa, where we recorded a total of 71. Typically nest lower down the cliffs than their black-legged cousins, although not always. A few seen on the crossings to and from the Commanders.

## STERNIDAE

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*: Four in southern Sakhalin, 15 at the Zhupanovo River and eight at Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy.

Aleutian Tern *Sterna aleutica*: 20 in southern Sakhalin and five much closer birds off Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy.

## ALCIDAE

Common Murre (Thin-billed Murre, Common Guillemot) *Uria aalge*: Small numbers off southern Sakhalin and around Ostrov Kunashir and Ostrov Yankicha, and moderate numbers along the Kamchatka coast. Numerous at Ostrov Chirpoy and Ostrov Beringa (with 2800 counted in a day at the latter)

Brünnich's Murre (Thick-billed Murre, Brünnich's Guillemot) *Uria lomvia*: Widespread from the southern Kurils onwards and locally numerous. Maximum count 800 at Ostrov Chirpoy (plus 26 counted elsewhere that day).

Pigeon Guillemot *Cephus columba*: Widespread and locally common from Ostrov Chirpoy onwards. Maximum count 50 at Ostrov Yankicha. The form occurring in much of the Kurils is *snowi*, which has little or even no white wing patch.

Spectacled Guillemot *Cephus carbo*: Widespread in small numbers from southern Sakhalin through the Kurils as far north as Ostrov Chirpoy.

Long-billed Murrelet *Brachyramphus perdix*: We were not to know that the single bird most of us saw very well right by the ship as we left Korsakov was to be the only good sighting of the cruise. They are common along the Kamchatka coast, but stormy weather was to see our coastal cruise cancelled! In addition to the one of Korsakov, Mark saw two off Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy.

Ancient Murrelet *Synthliboramphus antiquus*: Scattered records of small to moderate numbers from the waters between Sakhalin and the southern Kurils to the Kamchatka coast. More numerous at Ostrov Matua, where about 200 were counted.

Crested Auklet *Aethia cristatella*: Seven off southern Sakhalin and then none until we reached Ostrov Chirpoy, after which they were locally numerous as far as Ostrov Kharimkotan. It was hard to 'guesstimate' the numbers at the incredible colony on Yankicha, but we put down 100,000.

Whiskered Auklet *Aethia pygmaea*: Two near Ostrov Chirpoy and five between Ostrov Simushir and Ostrov Ketoy. One of the great highlights of the cruise was the fantastic concentration of these pretty little alcids at and around Ostrov Yankicha, where we recorded some 7000 at the colony and in the tidal races around the island. Of course their numbers were dwarfed by the Crested Auklets but they stole the show with their crazy-looking head plumes. Voted 'Bird of the Trip' by a long way!

Least Auklet *Aethia pusilla*: 10 off the Zhupanovo River. Very few breed this far south, although small colonies have been found in recent decades as far west as the Magadan region in the Sea of Okhotsk.

Parakeet Auklet *Cyclorhynchus psittacula*: A total of 14 around the northwest corner of Ostrov Beringa, where they nest in moderate numbers.

Rhinoceros Auklet *Cerorhinca monocerata*: Good numbers recorded between southern Sakhalin and Ostrov Iturup (where we recorded 51 in a day), and around Ostrov Kunashir. Elsewhere, just a single off Ostrov Chirpoy.

Horned Puffin *Fratercula corniculata*: Much less common than Tufted, with scattered records of up to 12 from Ostrov Kunashir to Ostrov Beringa.

Tufted Puffin *Lunda cirrhata*: These clumsy, lumbering but attractive and amusing birds were numerous from Ostrov Urup onwards. Our maximum count was 3000 at Ostrov Ekarma. Elsewhere, a single off Ostrov Iturup and four off Ostrov Kunashir.

## COLUMBIDAE

Rock Dove *Columba livia*: Feral birds were fairly common in southern Sakhalin and at Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy.

Oriental Turtle Dove (Rufous Turtle Dove) *Streptopelia orientalis*: Present in small numbers in southern Sakhalin and on Ostrov Iturup, but more common on Ostrov Kunashir.

## CUCULIDAE

Common Cuckoo (Eurasian Cuckoo) *Cuculus canorus*: Present in small numbers in southern Sakhalin, on Ostrov Kunashir and Ostrov Iturup, and on the Kamchatka coast.

Oriental Cuckoo (Horsfield's Cuckoo) *Cuculus optatus*: Fairly common in southern Sakhalin. Elsewhere, one or two heard on Ostrov Kunashir, Ostrov Iturup and at Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy. This form, which breeds in temperate Eurasia, has been renamed *optatus* as it was discovered that this name antedates *horsfieldii*. As a result the English name Horsfield's Cuckoo for this species is no longer appropriate and Oriental Cuckoo becomes the best option. (*C. saturatus* becomes Himalayan Cuckoo.)

## STRIGIDAE

Ural Owl *Strix uralensis*: (H): Two heard during the nocturnal outing in Sakhalin.

## APODIDAE

Fork-tailed Swift (Pacific Swift) *Apus pacificus*: Common in southern Sakhalin, on Ostrov Iturup and at the Zhupanovo River. In addition, two over Ostrov Urup.

## ALCEDINIDAE

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*: (NL): One for Alan on Ostrov Kunashir.

Crested Kingfisher *Ceryle lugubris*: One of these big kingfishers at the Zapovednika Kurilskiy on Ostrov Kunashir.

## PICIDAE

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*: Singles at Ostrov Kunashir and Ostrov Simushir. In addition, Werner saw one in southern Sakhalin.

Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker *Dendrocopos kizuki*: After dipping in southern Sakhalin, where they are normally easy to see, it was a relief to find three at the Zapovednika Kurilskiy on Ostrov Kunashir.

## ALAUDIDAE

Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis*: Common in open areas in southern Sakhalin and scattered records of small numbers from the Kurils and the Zhupanovo River.

## HIRUNDINIDAE

Sand Martin (Bank Swallow) *Riparia riparia*: 20 in southern Sakhalin and 15 on Ostrov Iturup.

Asian House Martin *Delichon dasypus*: A single at Reydovo on Ostrov Iturup was presumably an overshooting migrant from Japan.

## MOTACILLIDAE

Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsonii*: Small numbers in southern Sakhalin.

Pechora Pipit *Anthus gustavi*: Two seen and two more heard at Ostrov Beringa.

Buff-bellied Pipit (American Pipit) *Anthus rubescens*: Regularly seen (up to 12) in the northern Kurils from Ostrov Simushir to Ostrov Atlasova.

Alaska Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] tschutschensis*: A single in southern Sakhalin and two at the Zhupanovo River.

Green-headed Wagtail *Motacilla [flava] taivana*: 12 of these very smart wagtails in southern Sakhalin.  
Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*: A single on Ostrov Kunashir.  
East Siberian Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] ocularis*: Two at the Zhupanovo River.  
Black-backed Wagtail *Motacilla lugens*: Common in southern Sakhalin and throughout the Kurils. In addition, three at the Zhupanovo River.

#### TROGLODYTIDAE

Winter Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*: Widespread in small numbers in southern Sakhalin and in the Kurils.

#### PRUNELLIDAE

Japanese Accentor *Prunella rubida*: (NL): Werner saw two as he pressed on to the summit in southern Sakhalin.

#### TURDIDAE

Japanese Robin *Erithacus akahige*: Superb views of a singing male in southern Sakhalin. In the Kurils, relatively common on Ostrov Iturup and Ostrov Urup. Voted No.3 in the 'Bird of the Trip' contest.

Rufous-tailed Robin *Luscinia sibilans*: Common in southern Sakhalin, where its descending whinny was regularly heard, and quite a few of these habitual skulkers were observed singing from the treetops.

Siberian Rubythroat *Luscinia calliope*: Positively common in the Kurils, where we recorded up to 20 in a day. Elsewhere, a couple heard in southern Sakhalin, a few on the Kamchatka coast and even a migrant on board the ship between Sakhalin and the southern Kurils. Voted No.4 in the 'Bird of the Trip' contest.

Siberian Blue Robin *Luscinia cyane*: (H): Fairly common in southern Sakhalin, but we were distracted by the island's specialities and never managed to see one!

Northern Red-flanked Bluetail (Northern Orange-flanked Bush Robin) *Tarsiger cyanurus*: Fairly common in the hill forest of southern Sakhalin.

Siberian Stonechat *Saxicola maura*: Common in southern Sakhalin and small numbers on Ostrov Kunashir and Ostrov Iturup.

Siberian Thrush *Zoothera sibirica*: Great views of one male and another heard in the hill forest of southern Sakhalin.

Brown-headed Thrush *Turdus chrysolaus*: Common almost throughout the Kurils, from Ostrov Iturup northwards. Also small numbers in southern Sakhalin.

#### SYLVIIDAE

Japanese Bush Warbler *Cettia diphone*: Common in southern Sakhalin and in the southern Kurils from Ostrov Kunashir to Ostrov Urup.

Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella ochotensis*: Common in coastal areas of southern Sakhalin and throughout the Kurils. Elsewhere, one heard at the Zhupanovo River and one seen at Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy.

Lanceolated Warbler *Locustella lanceolata*: One seen and two heard on Ostrov Iturup.

Sakhalin Grasshopper Warbler (Sakhalin Warbler) *Locustella amnicola*: Its explosive, noisy song was quite commonly heard in southern Sakhalin, where we managed to see two individuals. Elsewhere, one seen on Ostrov Kunashir and two heard on Ostrov Iturup. This form was formerly lumped in Gray's Grasshopper Warbler (or Gray's Warbler) *Locustella fasciolata*, but is split by *Clements* and other authors.

Black-browed Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus bistrigiceps*: A few in southern Sakhalin.

Eastern Crowned Warbler *Phylloscopus coronatus*: One at the Zapovednika Kurilskiy on Ostrov Kunashir was seen by Mark, Dave and Werner but only heard by the rest of the group.

Sakhalin Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus borealoides*: Fairly common in the hill forests of southern Sakhalin.

Arctic Warbler *Phylloscopus borealis*: A few in southern Sakhalin and common in the Kurils from Ostrov Iturup northwards, and also along the Kamchatka coast. The form concerned, *xanthodryas*, has a very different song and some morphological differences from 'typical' Arctic Warblers, so may represent a distinct species.

Pallas's Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus proregulus*: Common in southern Sakhalin. A very accomplished songster.

Radde's Warbler *Phylloscopus schwarzi*: Fairly common in southern Sakhalin.

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*: Not uncommon in southern Sakhalin.

#### MUSCICAPIDAE

Grey-streaked Flycatcher *Muscicapa griseisticta*: (NL): One for Janice, Steve and John on Ostrov Kunashir and another for Alan, Steve and Janice on Ostrov Atlasova.

Asian Brown Flycatcher *Muscicapa dauurica*: Four on Ostrov Kunashir. In addition, Marius, Janice and John saw one on Ostrov Simushir.

Red-throated Flycatcher (Taiga Flycatcher) *Ficedula albicilla*: (H/NL): One heard at the Zhupanovo River and also one seen by Janice at Ostrov Atlasova. Now treated as specifically distinct from Red-breasted Flycatcher *F. parva*.

Mugimaki Flycatcher *Ficedula mugimaki*: Mark had a young male in southern Sakhalin.

Narcissus Flycatcher *Ficedula narcissina*: Small numbers of these gorgeous birds in southern Sakhalin and two males on Ostrov Kunashir.

#### PARIDAE

Willow Tit *Parus montanus*: Fairly common in southern Sakhalin.

Coal Tit *Parus ater*: Fairly common in southern Sakhalin and on Ostrov Kunashir.

Japanese Tit *Parus minor*: One seen and another heard in southern Sakhalin.

#### SITTIDAE

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*: One heard in southern Sakhalin and two seen on Ostrov Kunashir.

#### LANIIDAE

Bull-headed Shrike *Lanius bucephalus*: A nice pair at the Zapovednika Kurilskiy on Ostrov Kunashir.

#### CORVIDAE

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*: Two at Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy.

Spotted Nutcracker (Eurasian Nutcracker) *Nucifraga caryocatactes*: Six at Ostrov Simushir where they seem happy enough in the stunted Siberian Stone Pines. Elsewhere, Werner heard one in the highlands of Ostrov Iturup.

Oriental Crow *Corvus orientalis*: Common in southern Sakhalin, on Ostrov Kunashir and on the Kamchatka coast.

Large-billed Crow *Corvus macrorhynchus*: Common in southern Sakhalin and the southern Kurils as far as Ostrov Urup. The very large form *japonicus* (Japanese Crow) may well represent a distinct species. The *macrorhynchus* complex probably consists of several species and a taxonomic review is clearly needed.

Common Raven (Northern Raven) *Corvus corax*: Not uncommon from Ostrov Iturup onwards to the Kamchatka coast.

#### PASSERIDAE

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*: Two on Ostrov Beringa.

Russet Sparrow *Passer rutilans*: A male in southern Sakhalin and three birds at Kurilsk on Ostrov Iturup.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*: Fairly common in southern Sakhalin and on Ostrov Iturup. Elsewhere, a single on Ostrov Beringa and three at Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy.

#### FRINGILLIDAE

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla*: (H/NL): One heard at the Zhupanovo River and Marius saw a male on Ostrov Atlasova.

Grey-capped Greenfinch (Oriental Greenfinch) *Carduelis sinica*: Widespread and fairly common in southern Sakhalin and throughout the Kurils. In addition, a couple of singles on the Kamchatka coast.

Eurasian Siskin *Carduelis spinus*: A few in southern Sakhalin and one on Ostrov Kunashir. In addition, Steve saw one on Ostrov Atlasova.

Common Redpoll *Carduelis flammea*: One at the Zhupanovo River.

Common Crossbill (Red Crossbill) *Loxia curvirostra*: 10 (and later Jeremy heard a single) in southern Sakhalin.

Common Rosefinch (Scarlet Rosefinch) *Carpodacus erythrinus*: Fairly common at the Zhupanovo River.

Long-tailed Rosefinch *Uragus sibiricus*: Four of these beautiful finches in southern Sakhalin. In addition, some of the group saw a male on Ostrov Urup.

Grey-bellied Bullfinch *Pyrrhula griseiventris*: Small numbers in southern Sakhalin and on Ostrov Simushir.

#### EMBERIZIDAE

Lapland Longspur (Lapland Bunting) *Calcarius lapponicus*: Very common on Ostrov Beringa where we counted 40 in a few hours.

Snow Bunting *Plectrophenax nivalis*: Four on Ostrov Beringa.

Grey Bunting *Emberiza variabilis*: Small numbers in southern Sakhalin and on Ostrov Iturup, Ostrov Simushir, Ostrov Paramushir and Ostrov Atlasova. Typically a retiring species, but sometimes perched out in full view whilst singing.

Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala*: Common in southern Sakhalin and the southern Kurils, becoming uncommon in the northern Kurils and on the Kamchatka coast.

Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica*: A male seen and another heard at the Zhupanovo River and another male seen at Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskiy.

Yellow-breasted Bunting *Emberiza aureola*: (NL): Dave, Janice, Marius and Claire saw a male at the Zhupanovo River.

Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus*: Scattered records of small numbers, including one that came aboard the ship!

#### MAMMALS

Siberian Chipmunk *Tamias sibiricus*: One in southern Sakhalin.

Arctic Fox *Vulpes lagopus*: Fantastic views of three at Ostrov Yankicha at the huge alcid colony, and a fourth animal heard calling from high up the slope. Unbelievably tame and even coming right to the zodiacs and naiads to chew the mooring ropes!

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*: (NL): One seen by some of the group on Ostrov Kunashir.

Brown Bear *Ursus arctos*: Four seen well at the 'Lion's Mouth' on Ostrov Iturup and one at the mouth of the Zhupanovo River.

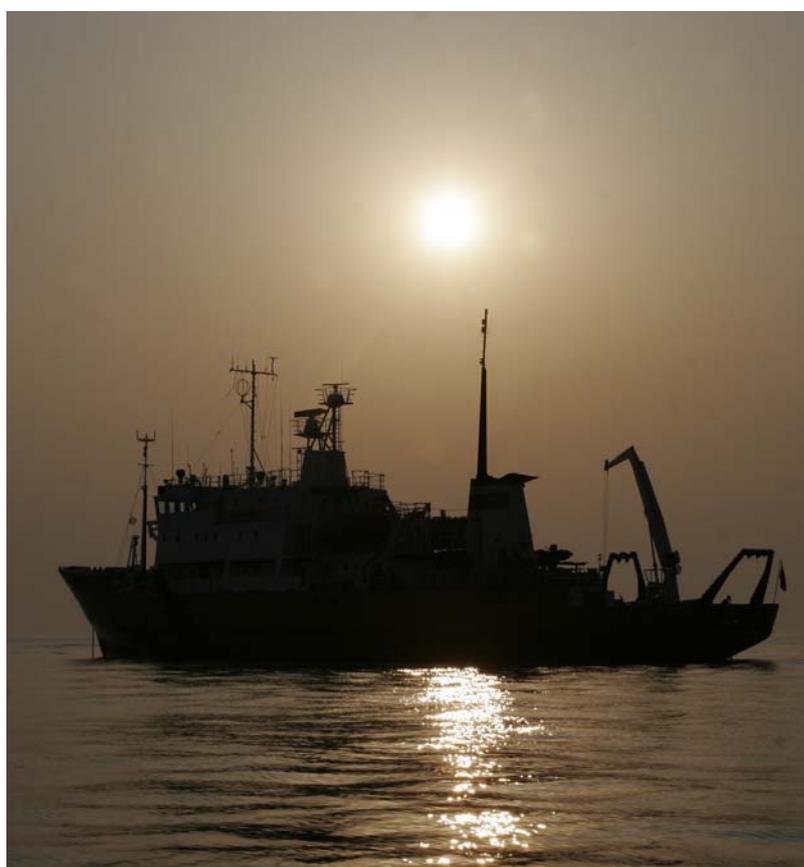
Northern Fur Seal *Callorhinus ursinus*: A huge colony, 1000 strong at Mys Severo-Zapadny on Ostrov Beringa. Elsewhere, three west of Ostrov Iturup and two between Kamchatka and Ostrov Beringa. Often seen far from land.

Northern Sea-Lion (Steller's Sea-Lion) *Eumetopias jubatus*: Regularly seen, usually in small to moderate numbers, from Ostrov Chirpoy onwards. Sometimes more common, with 60 at Ostrov Matua and 68 at Ostrov Beringa.

- Ribbon Seal *Histiophoca fasciata*: A male at sea between Ostrov Yankicha and Ostrov Matua.
- Largha Seal *Pagophilus largha*: Common in southern Sakhalin, where we recorded up to 122 in a day. Elsewhere, one at Ostrov Iturup and three at Ostrov Paramushir.
- Harbour Seal (Common Seal) *Phoca vitulina*: Scattered records of small numbers from the Kurils and the Kamchatka coast. More of a surprise were 20 well up the Zhupanovo River, presumably attracted by the salmon run.
- Eurasian Otter (European Otter) *Lutra lutra*: One was swimming in the Zhupanovo River as we passed.
- Sea Otter *Enhydra lutris*: Small numbers in the Kurils, 25 at Ostrov Beringa and two off the Zhupanovo River. Great views of them lying on their backs eating fish and shellfish.
- Northern Minke Whale *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*: Good views of one in calm waters off Ostrov Ekarma. In addition, John saw one at Ostrov Beringa.
- Sei Whale *Balaenoptera borealis*: Just the one, between Kamchatka and Ostrov Beringa.
- Fin Whale *Balaenoptera physalus*: Two between Kamchatka and Ostrov Beringa. In addition, Marius, Werner, John and Jeremy sighted two more off the Zhupanovo River.
- Great Sperm Whale *Physeter catodon*: A truly extraordinary total of 22 in a day between Ostrov Urup and Ostrov Chirpoy. This is surely the 'Sperm Whale Alley' of the world! In addition, one off Ostrov Kharimkotan. Voted No.5 in the 'Bird of the Trip' contest. (Yes, mammals qualify!)
- Dall's Porpoise *Phocoenoides dalli*: Regularly seen, in numbers ranging from one to 14, from Iturup to the Zhupanovo River. Their bow-waves as they swept along, and lack of a dorsal fin, were striking, as was their black and white patterning.
- Killer Whale (Orca) *Orcinus orca*: A total of eight in the calm waters off Ostrov Paramushir
- Pacific White-sided Dolphin *Lagenorhynchus obliquidens*: (NL): John saw three off Kharimkotan.



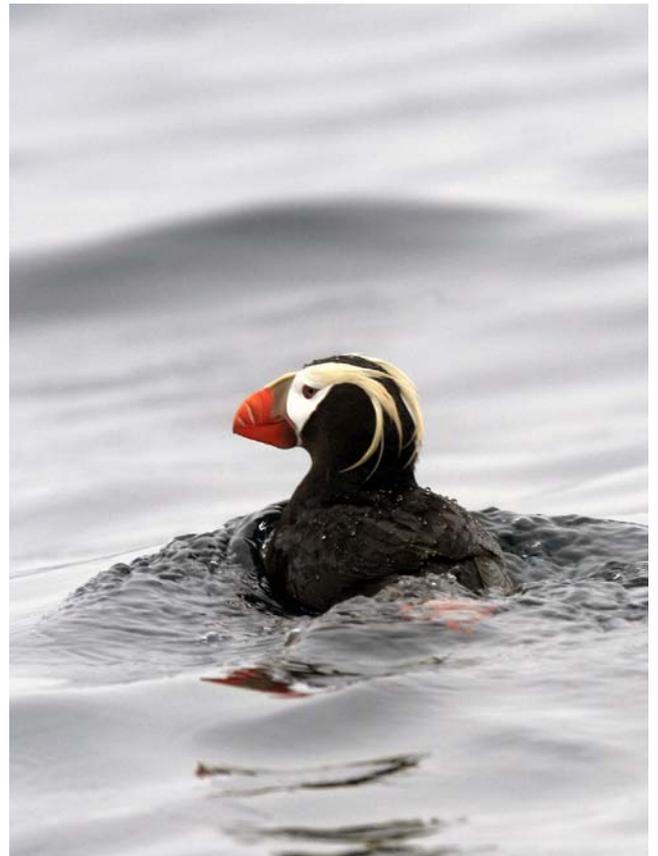
Before we headed out to sea we had time to explore southern Sakhalin, seeing such great birds as the stunning Japanese Robin (top), the equally lovely Narcissus Flycatcher (bottom left), the handsome Green-headed Wagtail (middle right) and the secretive Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler (bottom right).



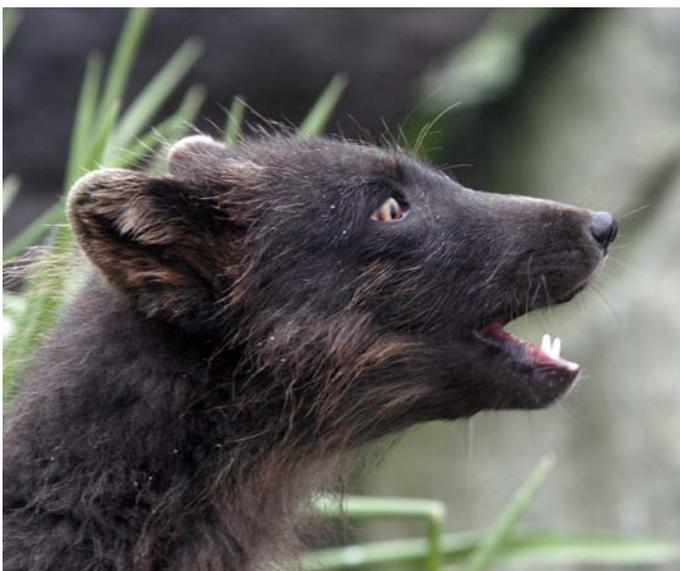
The volcanic scenery of the Kurils was endlessly impressive, exemplified by this nearly perfect volcano on Kunashir. Wildflowers were a particular feature of the cruise, with many Asian species of interest to visitors from Europe and North America. The Professor Khromov, our home from home amidst the wilderness.



It was a great trip for sea mammals, and in particular Great Sperm Whales. The sequence on the left of the page shows the spectacular diving sequence. Sea Otters were a fun creature to see, typically swimming on their backs. And of course pelagic seabirds, including the huge Laysan Albatross (middle right) and visiting Mottled Petrels (bottom right) from the Southern Ocean, were a highlight of the cruise.



Auks, or alcids, are the crowning glory of the wild Kuril and Commander Islands. We saw around 100,000 Crested Auklets (bottom) at Yankicha, give or take tens of thousands, and thousands of fantastic Whiskered Auklets (top left). The comical Tufted Puffin (top right) was one of the most widespread species.



Brünnich's Guillemots (top left) were also very numerous and other exciting species included Rhinoceros Auklet (top right), Pigeon Guillemot (middle right, of the race *snowi*, lacking a white wing patch) and Horned Puffin (middle left). Who could forget the Arctic Foxes at Yankicha, or the colourful Red-faced Cormorants that we encountered at many places?



Some of the best birds came at the end of the cruise. Ostrov Beringa in the Commander Islands produced the restricted-range Rock Sandpiper and the even more localized Red-legged Kittiwake, while our cruise on the Zhupanovo River gave us all wonderful views of the magnificent Steller's Sea Eagle.