



Steller's Sea Eagle (all photos by Dave Farrow unless otherwise indicated)

JAPAN IN WINTER

4 – 20 FEBRUARY 2016

LEADERS: DAVE FARROW and CHIKARA OTANI

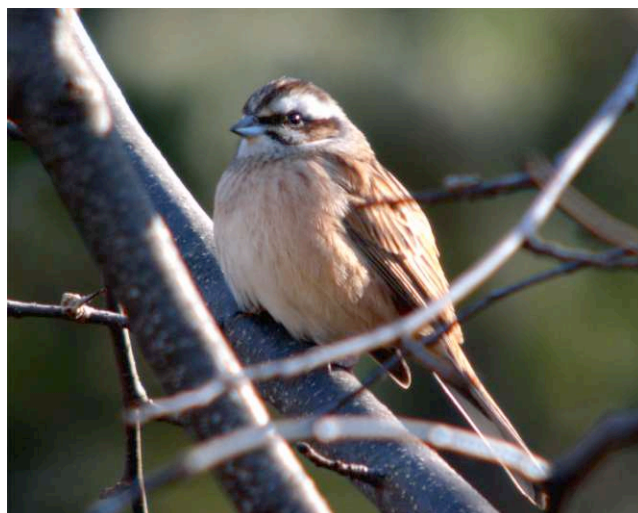
This year's winter tour to Japan was once again a truly wonderful trip around this enchanting country, with its thrilling and spectacular avifauna. As always the host country was very hospitable, with delightful people and an exciting cuisine, all adding hugely to the enjoyment of the birding. The weather stayed fine for the most part, although on Hokkaido we suffered a 'warm' spell when it actually rained, however that did provide a spectacular landscape of ice once it froze! Visiting the three main islands, we began on Honshu where in the crisp snowy hills we saw three Copper Pheasant, White-backed and Japanese Green Woodpecker, Long-

billed Plovers, Long-tailed Rosefinch and a Japanese Accentor. We visited the Snow Monkeys of Nagano, where Japanese Macaques have learned the habit of sitting in a hot pool, and along the north coast we encountered a suite of thrilling rarities, namely Scaly-sided Merganser, Siberian Crane and Swan Goose, along with Baikal Teal, Tundra and Taiga Bean Geese, Pacific and Black-throated Divers, Ancient Murrelets, Grey-headed Lapwings and a Solitary Snipe. Shifting to the warmer climes of Kyushu, we enjoyed the spectacle of thousands of Hooded and White-naped Cranes at Arasaki, along with Saunders's Gulls, Black-faced Spoonbills, Long-billed Dowitcher, Ruddy-breasted Crake, Daurian Jackdaw, Chinese Penduline Tits and Chestnut-eared Bunting. Elsewhere in Kyushu we saw a strikingly dark form of Ural Owl, Japanese Murrelets, White-bellied Green Pigeon, Crested Kingfisher, Ryukyu Minivets, and had the nice surprise of seeing the normally elusive Grey Bunting at a feeder, together with Forest Wagtail and Yellow-throated Buntings. Shifting northwards to Hokkaido, we visited the dancing Red-crowned Cranes and watched them being mugged by White-tailed Eagles! Despite there being no pack ice this year, we were still able to enjoy scores of Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles at close range as they gathered around a snowy harbour. Blakiston's Fish Owl entertained as hoped, eating his fish supper in a snowy streambed, and a fine pair of Ural Owls were seen at a daytime roost. Also around Hokkaido we saw Spectacled, Pigeon and Brunnich's Guillemots, Least Auklets, Red-faced Cormorants, Rough-legged Buzzard, Pallas's Rosefinches, Asian Rosy Finches and a vagrant Golden-crowned Sparrow. We had an excellent pelagic extension to the tour, a great day at sea where we saw good numbers of Short-tailed Albatross, plus Laysan and Black-footed Albatross. Mammals featured were Japanese Serow, Largha Seal and Northern Sea-Lion. 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 Haneda airport, we made our way across town to Tokyo station where we caught the Shinkansen to Karuizawa, a journey that passed rapidly as the train hit a top speed of 274kph! We disembarked into sunlit snowy uplands and headed towards our hotel, en route pausing to look at Black-backed Wagtail, Hawfinch, and the only Azure-winged Magpie of the tour. We ate our lunch overlooking the hotel bird feeders that were busy with numerous Varied, Japanese and Willow Tits, Pale and Dusky Thrushes, and a splendid Japanese Accentor that was the only one of the tour. We headed into the nearby woods, and crunching around on recent snowfall we found Japanese Green, Great Spotted and Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers, Long-tailed Tits and a pair of Brown Dipper, before retreating to our hotel for a sumptuous banquet.



Varied Tit



Meadow Bunting

The following morning at dawn we drove along a forest road, seeing two Japanese Serow, Wild Boar and numerous Sika Deer, more Japanese Green Woodpeckers, Grey-bellied Bullfinch, a large flock of Bramblings, and numerous Eurasian Jays of the race *japonicus*. After a break for breakfast we headed once

more into the woods, and along a snowy track we had a big thrill when a stunning male Copper Pheasant was spotted scampering up a snowy slope in the sunshine. How splendid! Also we saw several Brown Dipper and Japanese Grosbeak, but the fruit-laden mistletoe clumps did not yet attract any Waxwings. In the village we found a male Long-tailed Rosefinch, and we visited a small lake where we saw Smew, Goosanders and Northern Pintail. Along the adjacent river we enjoyed good looks at Long-billed Plovers, Green Sandpipers, a pair of Mandarin Ducks, Rustic and Meadow Buntings, Japanese Wagtails, Bull-headed Shrikes and Dusky Thrushes. A vocal Brown-cheeked Rail called loudly from a small patch of reeds, but could not be coaxed into view.

We headed out for the day along a mountain road where we briefly saw a pair of Copper Pheasant on a steep slope, had a prolonged look at a splendid male White-backed Woodpecker, and found a troop of Japanese Macaque by the roadside. We found a Mountain Hawk Eagle perched high in a tree, and then we headed eastwards into Gunma Province on a wider hunt for Japanese Waxwings. Our first stop was at a park full of ancient burial mounds where the trees were full of mistletoe clumps, we had some superlative looks at Japanese Grosbeaks and Hawfinches feeding on the ground, plus handsome Bramblings, a flock of Olive-backed Pipits and our first Japanese White-eye. At another site in the hills that also had an impressive display of mistletoe, we saw more Brown Dipper, Japanese Green and Great Spotted Woodpeckers, a flock of Eurasian (or should it be Japanese?) Jays, but no Waxwings so we headed homeward, through some spectacular mountain scenery lit by a lurid pink and orange evening sky. Our hotel laid on yet another feast for us, with lobster, roast beef, the table groaning with all manner of interesting dishes.



Japanese Macaque



Scaly-sided Merganser

After a last look at the hotel feeders, where the Japanese Accentor was happily groveling beneath the bird table, plus a Japanese Squirrel that popped in for a visit, we headed off to the Snow Monkey Park in the hills not far to the north. After slithering along the snowy trail, we enjoyed the curious spectacle of the monkeys in the hot tub - surrounded by people in brightly coloured coats. This attraction has become very popular and there were many more tourists than monkeys! A few birds persisted, and we found a pair of Grey-bellied Bullfinch, Goldcrest and Coal Tit, before we regrouped and we headed off to the coast. We drove into a snowstorm as we crossed the pass, but luckily most of the snow had already fallen, presenting us with a spectacular winter wonderland. We continued along the north coast highway with its innumerable tunnels, and diverted to the city Kanazawa, hoping to find a male Scaly-sided Merganser that was over-wintering on the Saigawa River that passes through the town. We were thrilled to find that it was still present, and enjoyed prolonged close views, watching it energetically feeding in the rapids, keeping close company with a female Goosander. Also here we saw Long-billed Plover, Brown Dipper and Common Goldeneye, before continuing to our hotel in Kaga.

It was a fine and sunny morning in Kaga, and we crunched our way on icy ground to nearby fields where we saw a cock Green Pheasant, a flock of Bewick's and Whooper Swans on flooded paddyfields, and our first skeins of Greater White-fronted Geese passed overhead. We visited a pond where we had close views of a large number of Falcated Ducks, and on nearby fields were able to study thousands of Greater White-fronted Geese on the ground. In rice paddies we found a flock of 25 Grey-headed Lapwings, and along the Sea of Japan coast we saw Ancient Murrelets, Rhinoceros Auklet, Red-throated, Black-throated and Pacific Divers, Red-necked Grebes, Pelagic and Japanese Cormorants. We ate lunch at the Duck Observatory where we watched a couple of dozen Baikal Teal (the majority of the flock absent for some reason), Taiga Bean Geese and a handful of Tundra Bean Geese. We received word that there was an adult Siberian Crane not far from here, so we duly went on the hunt. Not an unobtrusive species, we quickly found it in an area where hundreds of Bewick's Swans were gathered, along with an escort of three Hooded Cranes. This gorgeous giant even chose to give us a picturesque flyby, as it passed in front of the clear snowy mountain backdrop. Another rarity present in this area was Swan Goose, and we had to search more widely before finding it together with a flock of Swans. We then found a Solitary Snipe in damp woodlands, feeding in a marshy clearing and rhythmically bobbing up and down to an inaudible beat. It had been a thrilling day, and we finished it off with a return to the Siberian Crane, and watched as the sunset turned its plumage pink.



Siberian Crane

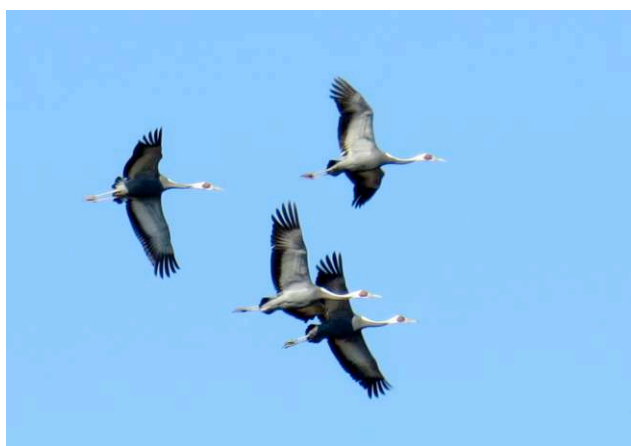


Solitary Snipe

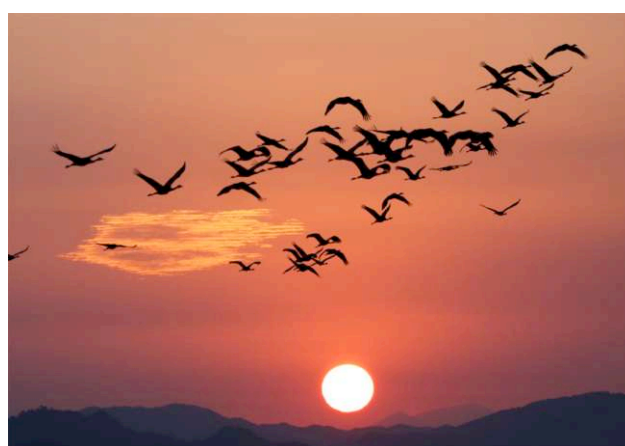
Time to move on, under drizzly grey skies we boarded our onward flight to Fukuoka in northern Kyushu, where the sun was shining and the temperature was in double figures! We picked up new vehicles and sped down the highway southwards to Yatsushiro on the Kuma River, where we scanned the mudflats from the elevated seawall. Unfortunately the tide was a long way out and the birding was largely long range, however we managed to see a few of the tern-like Saunders's Gulls feeding over the mud, plus a Black-faced Spoonbill, Vega, Black-tailed and Heuglin's Gulls, Terek Sandpiper, Kentish and Grey Plovers, a large flock of splendidly dapper Russet Sparrows, and our first Japanese Skylark and Buff-bellied Pipits. Ducks were in good number in the bay and we added Common Shelduck and Red-breasted Merganser, among the hordes of Eurasian Wigeon. We continued southwards towards Arasaki, pausing in one of the towns en route when we found a flock of Asian House Martins, and were surprised to see them go to roost in a taxi garage! We reached our family-run minshuku soon after dark, set in the heart of the 'Cranes resting area', and enjoyed a lovely meal to sound of bugling Cranes outside.

We began our day among thousands of Cranes, mostly Hooded but with a good number of the stately White-naped Cranes scattered throughout. We were able to pick out a handful of both Sandhill and Common Cranes as they all gathered in the dawn chill to gobble up the grain that was put out for them. A female Northern Goshawk gave us a good view, as she fed on some hapless prey while being pestered by a gaggle of Crows. There were many Oriental Rook here, together with the more typical Large-billed and Oriental Crows, plus Northern Lapwings, Dunlin, three Long-billed Dowitchers, a mixed flock of Eurasian and Black-

faced Spoonbills, Japanese Skylarks, many Buff-bellied Pipits plus a flyover Red-throated. We spent a leisurely morning admiring the Cranes that were all around our guesthouse, before heading out into the wider area of coastal rice fields. A big surprise was a female Greater Painted Snipe lurking in a ditch, plus we found Chestnut-eared, Black-faced and Common Reed Buntings, dozens of Common Snipe and a big Peregrine Falcon that flew around upsetting things. From scrubby margins we flushed a couple of Eurasian Woodcock, then headed inland to where a mountain river wound its way through the hills where we found Crested Kingfisher, several Brown Dippers, Eurasian Wren of the race *fumigatus*, plus we heard the eerie bubbling of White-bellied Green Pigeon. Back at Arasaki in the late afternoon, we spent a while scanning ditches and reedbeds, and found two Ruddy-breasted Crake and an Amur Wagtail.



White-naped Cranes



Hooded Cranes

On our second morning at Arasaki, we enjoyed the spectacular sight of flocks of Cranes flying across an orange-hued sky as the sun emerged from the hills to the east. Another Ruddy-breasted Crake was seen, we found a couple of Daurian Jackdaw, and eventually located a flock of Chinese Penduline Tit lurking in a reedbed. We packed up and bade farewell to our friendly hosts, checking the fields as we went seeing both species of Spoonbills once more, Long-billed Dowitcher and a Temminck's Stint, a couple of Black-necked Grebe on the sea, and many Japanese Grosbeaks feeding around the pine trees. We then traveled across Kyushu, to Mi-ike and its attractive crater lake nestled among the volcanoes of the Kirishima range. Making our way to the lake side, we discovered that there was now a busy feeding station by the car park (with the obligatory gaggle of photographers lying in wait) and after a short wait we had stunning views of the normally hyper-elusive Grey Buntings, plus Yellow-throated Buntings, Red-billed Leiothrix, Red-flanked Bluetail and the returning wintering Forest Wagtail that sat on a stump and wiggled its butt at us. Hmm, that was lucky! We remained in the forest until darkness fell, and after some teasing we had a great look at a vocal Ural Owl, a curiously sooty-plumaged bird of the race *fuscescens*. It wasn't far to go to reach our comfortable hotel, and we were once again spoiled by a superb meal.

The following day we began early to reach the east coast of Kyushu, and began our birding in an area of fields and wooded copses where under leaden skies we saw Ryukyu Minivet and some flyover White-bellied Green Pigeons, plus a Crested Kingfisher and Yellow-throated Buntings. We headed up the coast in search of Japanese Murrelets, but the forecast was not good, and unfortunately the boat operators had cancelled our Murrelet pelagic due to stormy weather. Nevertheless we intently scanned the bay from harbour walls, and eventually picked one out on the calmer water. So small and cute, they earn their Japanese name of 'Sea Sparrow'. As we stood on the end of a harbour wall, two Murrelets surfaced up just a few metres away from us, clearly as surprised to see us as we were to see them, and gave us a good view as they scooted around the corner and out of sight. Also here were numerous Black-necked and Great Crested Grebes, slaty-plumaged Pacific Reef Herons, Vega and Black-tailed Gulls. In the afternoon we visited a large estuary where we found Grey Plover, Sanderling, Kentish and a lone Lesser Sand Plover, Greater Scaup, more

Black-faced Spoonbills, another Long-billed Dowitcher and many Common Snipe. The rain that had been threatening all day suddenly came down in torrents, so we headed for home, content with a good days birding.

It was time for something completely different, and we headed to Kagoshima airport from where we caught a flight to Haneda, and after a brief pause we flew on to Kushiro in the hopefully snowy Hokkaido. Flying in over the coast it was clear that there is less snow this year, and on the ground temperatures were above zero! We had to move quickly on arrival, and were just in time to catch the Red-crowned Cranes feeding time, where scores of Cranes were tussling over the fish handouts with several White-tailed Eagles that came swooping down, in front of a mass audience of photographers. Our first Steller's Sea Eagle sat high in a tree at the back, and a Red Fox came boldly walking in among the Cranes in search of scraps. Once the show was over, our next stop was at a regular roost of Ural Owl, and we found a very pallid example of the race *japonica* sat in a tangle peering at us, so different to the one we had seen at Mi-ike. We made our way towards our hotel, but had to make an emergency stop when we found three male Pallas's Rosefinches feeding at the roadside. We had a nice view of this bird, until passing traffic flushed them and they disappeared back into the cold woodland.



Red-crowned Cranes



White-tailed Eagle with Red-crowned Cranes

The next morning we assembled at dawn, on a bridge that overlooked 150 Red-crowned Cranes standing in their mid-river roost. This is usually a photographer's favourite, where sub-zero conditions can make for dramatic pictures as the birds awaken. The only problem was that it was above freezing and pouring with rain! Most atypical weather! Eventually we left the damp cameramen nestling beneath their umbrellas and plastic sheets and retreated to our hotel for breakfast. At a nearby Crane feeding centre, we watched from the comfort of a heated observatory, watching Eurasian Nuthatch, Marsh Tit and Great Spotted Woodpecker, while the Red-crowned Cranes gathered in the field and proceeded to bugle and dance around a little. We headed cross-country to the coast, and reaching the long spit of the Notsuke peninsula we scanned the sea for ducks, despite the difficult viewing with continuous rain lashing down on us! Nevertheless we found Stejneger's and many Black Scoter, Long-tailed Duck and Red-breasted Merganser, fancy-looking Harlequin Ducks and a couple of distant Spectacled Guillemot. A nearby harbour provided the spectacle of hundreds of Pelagic Cormorants lined up on the piers, and then it was time to head up the coast to Rausu and to our appointment with Blakiston's Fish Owl. We settled in to our minshuku overlooking the narrow river, ate a hearty meal (fish, of course!) then waited patiently for the Owl to come and visit. The deep hooting call coming from the dark hillside above us added to the suspense, and the Owl suddenly appeared by the snowy river. What a fantastic beast! It posed for a while, caught a fish, and then flew up to join its mate sat on a nearby post, then retreated to the forest. Thank you Mr Owl.

The weather had improved by the following morning, however this year there was a distinct lack of pack ice. The sea ice is formed in the Sea of Okhotsk, and only comes south when the weather and sea conditions permit. There were still large numbers of Eagles around, both Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles, many of which were now sat up in the trees right in the town. Although we were unable to enjoy the spectacle of Eagles sitting on ice floes, we spent a fun couple of hours in the harbour, watching the Eagles squabbling on the harbour walls, or flapping past us as they came and went from their foraging missions. It feels quite unreal to see a hundred or more Steller's Sea Eagles, plus a lesser number of White-tailed Eagles, dotted around the hillsides and loafing on harbour walls, or soaring around in the air above the town. We dragged ourselves away and explored further up the coast, where we found many tiny Least Auklets bobbing about in the sunshine, and good numbers of Harlequin Ducks in small flocks every few hundred metres. As we departed this magical area and drove the coast road southwards, we had the rare sight of a group of Northern Sea Lions gathered on the surface close inshore. Further on, we entered an area where every tree branch, every plant stem and every blade of grass was encased with ice, sparkling in the sun and creating a phenomenally beautiful effect like Christmas decorations made of glass. This was quite staggering to behold, and I for one have never witnessed such a thing before. Clearly rain the previous night had then frozen when the temperature dropped, caking everything in clear ice. Awesome. A final stop of the day by Lake Furen provided us with more views of *asiatica* Eurasian Nuthatches, Eurasian Jay of the *brandti* race and a Red Fox asleep on a log. To round off this remarkable day, at our hotel we enjoyed a feast of Hanasaki Crab and oysters.



Blakiston's Fish Owl



Steller's Sea Eagle

We seemed to have left the rain behind, and the following day was all sunshine and blue skies, although the temperature started at a respectable -10 C! An icy foray to a nearby harbour before breakfast produced Red-necked Grebe, many Red-breasted Mergansers and Long-tailed Ducks, then later we drove to another harbour and embarked on a small fishing boat, onto the cold ocean in search of seabirds. We enjoyed a range of close views of many Spectacled and several Pigeon Guillemots, Common and a single Brunnich's Guillemot, plus Ancient Murrelets. After our boat ride we warmed up at the local convenience store, then went for some scanning off the headland of Cape Nosappu. Here we found three Red-faced Cormorants, sat on a rock together with iridescent Pelagic Cormorants, and from the tip of the cape saw more Guillemots and Murrelets. Checking more harbours we found Slavonian and Black-necked Grebes, more Harlequin Duck, Black Scoters, Red-breasted Mergansers and Long-tailed Ducks. At the end of the day we happened upon a lone Asian Rosy Finch that perched for some prolonged views, then it was time to steel ourselves for another epic feast of seafood, tonight's centrepiece being Horsehair Crab!

Our final birding in this area was around a patch of woodland on the edge of town, where we saw a few familiar passerines such as Eurasian Nuthatch, Marsh Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Eurasian Jay, plus a Eurasian Red Squirrel. We drove to Cape Kiritappu on the south-facing coast, where we had sought permission to watch the bird feeders in the yard of a small guesthouse. A lovely flock of 60 Asian Rosy Finch came down as we waited, nervously gobbling up seed, plus a vagrant Golden-crowned Sparrow was also present, although rather elusive and only emerging into view for a minute. Two Rough-legged Buzzards hanging in the wind nearby were a welcome sight, plus we had splendid views of more Steller's Sea Eagles cruising over the cliffs. A scan of the sea yielded little, but in sheltered harbours we watched Greater Scaup and a Falcated Duck, and a smart flock of 250 Black Brant fed in the shallow bay, quite a sight when mixed together with the bright white Whooper Swans. Then we headed to the airport, en route revisiting the Ural Owl roost where this time we found a pair sat side by side. Time to shoehorn everything back into the bag, and fly to Tokyo for the night.



Ice formations on Hokkaido

After a leisurely start, those of us continuing on the extension headed out on Tokyo's fascinating railway network, to a suburban park where we lingered for the rest of the day. Some attractive pockets of habitat here include several wet paddies and muddy corners, where we watched two Eurasian Woodcock calmly feeding in the middle of the day, a smart Brown-headed Thrush, Rustic, Meadow and Black-faced Buntings, and in the late afternoon there was a sudden buzz among the waiting photographers as both Ruddy-breasted Crake and Brown-cheeked Rail emerged from a reedbed. Then we headed back across town to pick up our boat at the ferry port, and head southwards into the Pacific night in comfortable cabins, ready for a day of scanning the waves.

Dawn saw us just off the island of Mikurashima, where a pod of Dolphin came to inspect the ship in the half light. Once it was light enough, the Albatrosses began appearing. First up was Laysan Albatross, quickly followed by our first Short-tailed and Black-footed Albatrosses. The ship turned around once it had reached Hachichojima island, and began its return northward. We passed Miyakejima, and the birding really began to pick up as we entered what is known colloquially among birders as the 'Oshima Triangle'. The Albatross trickle became a steady stream, and we recorded a minimum of seventy birds in total, including 21 of the majestic Short-tailed Albatross that showed off a range of ages and plumages. Other seabirds were in rather short supply, despite the strong winds the weather perhaps wasn't stormy enough to supply other tubenoses, however we saw two Pomarine Skuas, and three Grey Phalarope that were surprisingly a write-in. A handful of Japanese Murrelets flew close-by as we approached Tokyo Bay, then the sun set for the final time on our tour as we headed back into Tokyo and the end of our wonderful journey.



Grey Bunting

SYSTEMATIC LIST OF SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

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

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

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

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

Swan Goose ◊ *Anser cygnoides* A nice bonus to see one of these at Komatsu, a rare winter visitor.

Taiga Bean Goose ◊ *Anser fabalis* At least fifty birds at Katano Kamo-ike. See note.

Tundra Bean Goose ◊ *Anser serrirostris* Just a few identified with the above at Katano Kamo-ike. See note.

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* Good numbers and a good show by 1500+ in the Kaga area.

Brant Goose ◊ (Black Brant) *Branta [bernicla] nigricans* A smart flock of 250+ at Kiritappu.

Bewick's Swan ◊ (Tundra S) *Cygnus [columbianus] bewickii* Hundreds near Komatsu were nice to see.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* A handful near Kaga, regular encounters on Hokkaido.

Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna* Seen in several places on Kyushu.

Mandarin Duck ◊ *Aix galericulata* Two at Toden Lake, five on a pond near Miyazaki.

Gadwall *Anas strepera* A few sightings on Honshu and Kyushu.

Falcated Duck ♦ *Anas falcata* A count of 86 near Kaga, a few near Miyazaki and a single on Hokkaido.

Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope* Seen in good numbers at many locations, mostly on Kyushu.

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 on various wetlands on Honshu and Kyushu.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* Regularly seen on wetlands on Honshu and Kyushu.

Baikal Teal ♦ *Anas formosa* Just 30+ lurking at the back of the pond at Katano Kamo-Ike. See note.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca* Frequently encountered on Honshu and Kyushu.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* Small numbers encountered on Honshu and Kyushu.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* Scattered sightings of small numbers on all three islands.

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* Small flocks around the Hokkaido coasts, much fewer than usually seen.

Harlequin Duck ♦ *Histrionicus histrionicus* Plenty seen around the Hokkaido coast, many good views acquired.

White-winged Scoter ♦ (Stejneger's S) *Melanitta [deglandi] stejnegeri* A handful around the Hokkaido coasts.

Black Scoter ♦ *Melanitta americana* Not uncommon around the Hokkaido coasts, but fewer than is usual.

Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis* In reasonable number around the Hokkaido coasts, always a welcome sight.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* Some nice examples on Hokkaido, in small groups along the coasts.

Smew ♦ *Mergellus albellus* Six at Lake Toden and the adjacent river, three at Katano Kamo-ike.

Goosander (Common Merganser) *Mergus merganser* Seen regularly on Hokkaido, also at Toden and Kanazawa.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* A couple at Yatsushiro, many more around the Hokkaido coasts.

Scaly-sided Merganser ♦ *Mergus squamatus* A smart male at Kanazawa where it is spending its third winter.



Scaly-sided Merganser



Swan Goose

Chinese Bamboo Partridge ♦ (introduced) *Bambusicola thoracicus* A smart trio in Maioka Park showed well.

Copper Pheasant ♦ *Symaticus soemmerringii* Two cocks and a hen at Karuizawa – you lucky people!

Green Pheasant ♦ *Phasianus versicolor* A single cock at Kaga was the only sighting of the tour.

Red-throated Loon (R-t Diver) *Gavia stellata* A few off the Komatsu coast and some more off the Nemuro coasts.

Black-throated Loon ♦ (B-t Diver) *Gavia arctica* At least eight seen off the Komatsu coasts.

Pacific Loon ♦ (P Diver) *Gavia pacifica* Two seen on the sea off the Komatsu coast.

Laysan Albatross ♦ *Phoebastria immutabilis* At least 24 counted on our pelagic.

Black-footed Albatross ♦ *Phoebastria nigripes* Ten seen on our pelagic.

Short-tailed Albatross ♦ *Phoebastria albatrus* 21 of various ages seen on our pelagic. See note.

Streaked Shearwater ♦ *Calonectris leucomelas* Fewer than is typical on our pelagic, perhaps 100+ and none close.

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* Frequent sightings along our route, except on Hokkaido.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena* Two off the Komatsu coast, another four seen on Hokkaido.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* Many at Kadogawa and around the Kyushu coasts.

Slavonian Grebe (Horned G) *Podiceps auritus* A few of Cape Nosappu and a couple off Notsuke.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* Scattered sightings around the Kyushu and Hokkaido coasts.

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* A maximum of eight at Arasaki.

Black-faced Spoonbill ♦ *Platalea minor* 13 at Hitotsuse, four at Arasaki, one at Yatsushiro. See note.

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

Eastern Great Egret *Ardea [alba] modesta* Seen often on Kyushu and Honshu.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* Seen in number on Kyushu, a few on Honshu

Pacific Reef Heron *Egretta sacra* Three seen at Kadogawa.

Pelagic Cormorant ♦ *Phalacrocorax pelagicus* Hundreds seen around the Hokkaido coasts and harbours.

Red-faced Cormorant ♦ *Phalacrocorax urile* Three winter-plumaged birds at Cape Nosappu.

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

Japanese Cormorant *Phalacrocorax capillatus* Ten on rocks near Komatsu, a few on our pelagic.

Western Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* Numerous along the Kyushu coasts, also in the Komatsu area.

Mountain Hawk-Eagle *Nisaetus nipalensis* A perched bird seen well near Karuizawa.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* A scattering of singles throughout the tour.

Northern Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* A good look at a female with prey at Arasaki.

Eastern Marsh Harrier *Circus spilonotus* A single bird showed well at Komatsu.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus* Single females seen at Arasaki and Kaga.

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

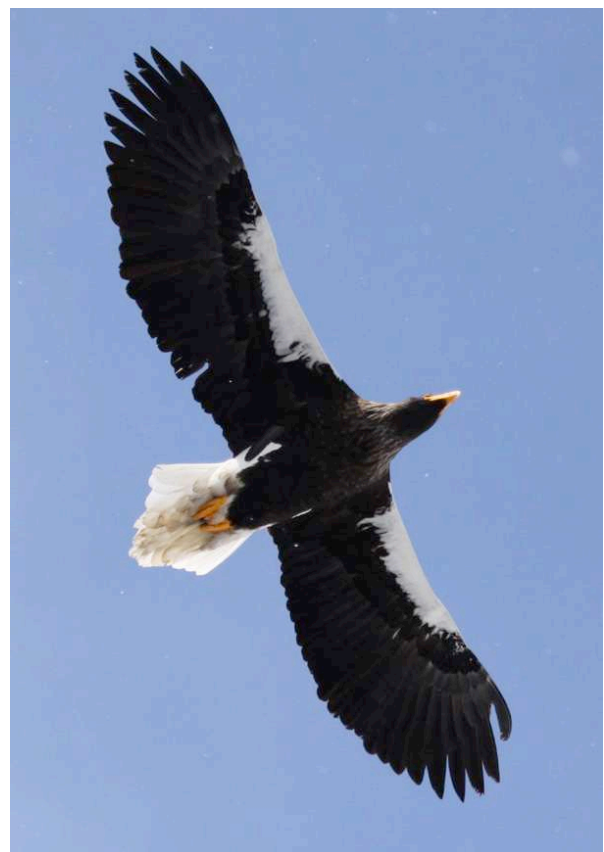
White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* Multiple sightings on Hokkaido, most numerous around Rausu harbour.

Steller's Sea Eagle ♦ *Haliaeetus pelagicus* A fantastic sight on Hokkaido, 100+ around Rausu harbour. See note.

Rough-legged Buzzard ♦ *Buteo lagopus* Three birds at Kiritappu, showed really well and close overhead.



Rough-legged Buzzard



Steller's Sea Eagle

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 Lake Toden, good views at Maioka Park.

Ruddy-breasted Crake *Porzana fusca* Three seen at Arasaki, one at Kanazawa, one at Maioka Park.

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* Not uncommon at Arasaki.

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

Siberian Crane ♦ *Grus leucogeranus* An adult at Komatsu was a welcome surprise.

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

White-naped Crane ♦ *Grus vipio* In good number this year at Arasaki, even though some were already departing.

Red-crowned Crane ◇ (**Japanese C**) *Grus japonensis* Plenty of good encounters with these on Hokkaido.
Common Crane *Grus grus* At least three in the Crane flocks at Arasaki, plus some hybrids.
Hooded Crane ◇ *Grus monacha* The most numerous Crane at Arasaki. Also three at Komatsu. See note.
Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* Good numbers of these at Arasaki.
Grey-headed Lapwing ◇ *Vanellus cinereus* 25 of these handsome birds seen in roadside fields at Kaga.
Grey Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* Several seen at both Yatsushiro and Hitotsuse.



Sandhill Cranes



White-naped Crane

Long-billed Plover ◇ *Charadrius placidus* Three at Toden Lake, another three at Kanazawa.
Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus* Several seen at both Yatsushiro and Hitotsuse.
Lesser Sand Plover (Mongolian S P) *Charadrius [mongolus] mongolus* A single at Hitotsuse.
Greater Painted-snipe *Rostratula benghalensis* A surprise find of a female in a ditch at Arasaki.
Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola* Two or more flushed at Arasaki, two feeding in the open at Maioka Park.



Eurasian Woodcock



Greater Painted Snipe

Solitary Snipe ◇ *Gallinago solitaria* Great views of one near Komatsu, feeding in a forest clearing.
Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* Plenty at Arasaki, also seen at a few other sites.
Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus* Three showed well at Arasaki, another at Hitotsuse.
Eurasian Curlew *Numenius arquata* Ten at Yatsushiro, a single at Hitotsuse.
Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* One at Yatsushiro.
Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* Regularly seen around Kyushu, also at Toden Lake.
Terek Sandpiper *Xenus cinereus* A single on the mud at Yatsushiro.
Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* A few birds seen around Kyushu, also at Toden Lake.
Sanderling *Calidris alba* Several on the sand at Hitotsuse.

Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii* A couple of singles seen at Arasaki.

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* Flocks seen at Yatsushiro, Arasaki, Hitotsuse and at Kiritappu.

Red Phalarope (Grey P) *Phalaropus fulicarius* At least three seen at sea on the extension.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* Singles seen at Lake Furen and at Kanazawa, also around Tokyo.

Saunders's Gull ♦ *Chroicocephalus saundersi* Just a handful seen at Yatsushiro, the tide being too far out for more!

Black-tailed Gull ♦ *Larus crassirostris* A few seen around the Kyushu coasts, more around the Izu islands.

Mew Gull ♦ (Kamchatka G) *Larus [canus] kamtschatschensis* In good number on Hokkaido.

Glaucous-winged Gull ♦ *Larus glaucescens* A regularly encountered feature of Hokkaido in small numbers.

Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus* Plenty seen on Hokkaido, especially along the Notsuke peninsula.

Vega Gull ♦ *Larus vegae* Plenty seen around the Kyushu coasts.

Slaty-backed Gull ♦ *Larus schistisagus* Abundant on Hokkaido, odd birds seen elsewhere.

Heuglin's Gull ♦ *Larus [fuscus] heuglini* Two of the yellow-legged 'taimyrensis' form at Yatsushiro.

Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus* Two seen from the Izu ferry.

Brunnich's Guillemot (Thick-billed Murre) *Uria lomvia* A single seen on our Habomai pelagic.

Common Murre (C Guillemot) *Uria aalge* Four seen off the Hokkaido coasts.

Pigeon Guillemot ♦ *Cepphus columba* Quite a few seen off Cape Nosappu, and from our Habomai pelagic.

Spectacled Guillemot ♦ *Cepphus carbo* Common off Cape Nosappu, from land and from our boat trip.



Spectacled Guillemot



Pigeon Guillemot



Japanese Murrelet



Harlequin Duck

Ancient Murrelet ♦ *Synthliboramphus antiquus* Good numbers off the Komatsu coast, also seen on Hokkaido.

Japanese Murrelet ♦ *Synthliboramphus wumizusume* Great views at Kadogawa, also seen in Tokyo Bay. See note.

Least Auklet ♦ *Aethia pusilla* A good number of these tiny fellows along the Shiretoko coast.

Rhinoceros Auklet ♦ *Cerorhinca monocerata* Elusive singles off the Komatsu and Shiretoko coasts.

Rock Dove (introduced) (feral) *Columba livia* If you must...

Oriental Turtle Dove (Rufous T D) *Streptopelia orientalis* In good number on Kyushu and Honshu.

White-bellied Green Pigeon ◇ (Japanese G P) *Treron sieboldii* Five birds seen on Kyushu, only in flight though.

Blakiston's Fish Owl ◇ *Bubo blakistoni* A great show by the male at Rausu. See note.

Ural Owl ◇ *Strix uralensis* Three individuals seen, one at Mi-ike and two on Hokkaido. See note.

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* Regularly encountered.

Crested Kingfisher *Megaceryle lugubris* Three at Kogawa, another flew over us at Koda.

Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker ◇ *Dendrocopos kizuki* Common around Karuizawa, also seen at Mi-ike

White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos* Great looks at a male near Karuizawa.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* Several seen around Karuizawa and on Hokkaido.

Japanese Green Woodpecker ◇ *Picus awokera* Seen well at Karuizawa, and Maioka Park.

Common Kestrel (Eurasian K) *Falco tinnunculus* Odd birds encountered along our route.

Merlin *Falco columbarius* Sightings at Kaga, Komatsu and Kushiro.

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* A couple showed well at Arasaki.



Ural Owl (race japonica) Hokkaido



Ural Owl (race fuscescens) Kyushu (C.Otani)

Ryukyu Minivet ◇ *Pericrocotus tegimae* A couple of views on Kyushu, perched and in flight.

Bull-headed Shrike ◇ *Lanius bucephalus* Regular encounters with this smart bird on Honshu and Kyushu.

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* Two races seen; *japonicus* at Karuizawa, *brandtii* on Hokkaido.

Azure-winged Magpie ◇ (Asian A-w M) *Cyanopica cyanus* One at Karuizawa was the only one of the tour.

Daurian Jackdaw ◇ *Coloeus dauuricus* Two juveniles seen at Arasaki.

Rook ◇ (Oriental R) *Corvus [frugilegus] pastinator* Many at Arasaki.

Carrion Crow ◇ (Oriental C) *Corvus [corone] orientalis* Frequently seen, in some places the most numerous Crow.

Large-billed Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* Common throughout.

Northern Raven *Corvus corax* Three at Mi-ike, another at Notsuke.

Coal Tit *Periparus ater* Seen at Karuizawa, Jigokudani and Mi-ike.

Varied Tit ◇ (Japanese V T) *Sittiparus varius* Common around feeders at Karuizawa, also seen at Mi-ike.

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris* Some good looks at these on Hokkaido, one memorably singing in the icebound trees.

Willow Tit *Poecile montanus* Seen quite commonly around Karuizawa.

Japanese Tit ◇ (Eastern Great T) *Parus minor* Seen on all three islands, most numerous at Karuizawa.

Chinese Penduline Tit ◇ *Remiz consobrinus* A flock of ten in the reedbeds at Arasaki.

Eurasian Skylark ◇ (Japanese S) *Alauda [arvensis] 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* A few seen in eastern Kyushu.

Asian House Martin *Delichon dasypus* Some 40 birds seen going to roost in a taxi garage near Arasaki.

Japanese Bush Warbler ◇ *Horornis diphone* Several views acquired at Arasaki and elsewhere.

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

Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis* One seen at Arasaki.

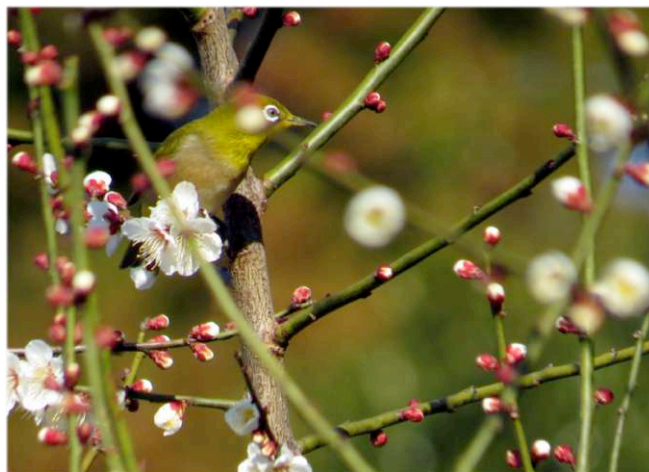
Chinese Hwamei (introduced) *Garrulax canorus* Heard at Karuizawa, several seen at Maioka Park.

Red-billed Leiothrix (introduced) *Leiothrix lutea* Seen well at Mi-ike.

Japanese White-eye *Zosterops japonicus* A few scattered sightings.
Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* A couple seen at the Snow Monkey park.
Eurasian Wren (Winter W) *Troglodytes troglodytes* A few at Karuizawa and Jigokudani, race *fumigatus*.
Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* Seen on all three islands, three races noted. See note.
White-cheeked Starling ◇ (Grey S) *Spodiopsar cineraceus* Frequently seen in small flocks on Honshu and Kyushu.
Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* Several at Arasaki, scarce in Japan.
Pale Thrush ◇ *Turdus pallidus* A small number seen on Honshu, more regular on Kyushu.
Brown-headed Thrush ◇ *Turdus chrysolaus* Great looks at this handsome bird eventually at Maioka Park.
Dusky Thrush ◇ *Turdus eunomus* Fairly common, and seen on most days.
Red-flanked Bluetail *Tarsiger cyanurus* Singles seen at Karuizawa and Mi-ike.



Daurian Redstart



Japanese White-eye

Daurian Redstart *Phoenicurus aureus* Seen rather commonly in Kyushu, a few seen on Honshu
Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius* A few of the *philippensis* race seen on Kyushu and around Komatsu.
Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasii* Frequent encounters at Karuizawa, also at Kanazawa, near Kogawa and at Rausu.
Russet Sparrow *Passer rutilans* Big flocks at Yatsushiro, also seen at Arasaki and Koda.
Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* Frequent around human habitation, seen almost daily.
Japanese Accentor ◇ *Prunella rubida* A single at Shiotsubo Onsen was the only one of the tour.
Forest Wagtail *Dendronanthus indicus* A returning wintering bird seen shockingly well at Mi-ike.
Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* Several noted on Kyushu, also at Karuizawa.
White Wagtail ◇ (Black-backed W) *Motacilla [alba] lugens* Seen often on Kyushu and Honshu.
White Wagtail (Amur W) *Motacilla [alba] leucopsis* A single at Arasaki was an unusual find.
Japanese Wagtail ◇ *Motacilla grandis* In good numbers at Toden Lake, a few elsewhere on Honshu and Kyushu.
Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni* First seen at Omuro Park, several seen at Arasaki.
Red-throated Pipit *Anthus cervinus* A couple of flyover calling birds at Arasaki.
Buff-bellied Pipit *Anthus rubescens* Plenty at Arasaki, and a few at Yatsushiro.
Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla* Flocks at Karuizawa, Arasaki and Omuro Park.
Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* A pleasing sight at several Locations on Honshu
Japanese Grosbeak ◇ *Eophona personata* Good numbers at Arasaki and Omuro Park, a few at Karuizawa.
Eurasian Bullfinch ◇ (Grey-bellied B) *Pyrrhula [pyrrhula] griseiventris* A couple at Karuizawa, also at Jigokudani.
Asian Rosy Finch ◇ *Leucosticte arctoa* One at Onnemoto, a flock of 60 at Kiritappu coming to feeders. Gorgeous.
Long-tailed Rosefinch ◇ *Carpodacus sibiricus* A single male at Karuizawa was our only sighting.
Pallas's Rosefinch ◇ *Carpodacus roseus* Three seen at the roadside on Hokkaido were a welcome sight.
Grey-capped Greenfinch (Oriental G) *Chloris sinica* Often seen in Honshu and Kyushu, big flocks at Arasaki.
Red Crossbill (Common C) *Loxia curvirostra* (H) Heard at Rausu.
Eurasian Siskin *Spinus spinus* A couple of brief sightings of flocks at Jigokudani and on Hokkaido.
Meadow Bunting ◇ *Emberiza cioides* Regularly encountered in Honshu and Kyushu, most numerous at Arasaki.
Chestnut-eared Bunting ◇ (Grey-headed B) *Emberiza fucata* Some good looks at these handsome birds at Arasaki.
Rustic Bunting ◇ *Emberiza rustica* A good number at Lake Toden, also at Arasaki and Maioka Park.

Yellow-throated Bunting ♦ (Elegant B) *Emberiza elegans* Several good looks at these fine fellows at Mi-ike.
Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala* Seen fairly commonly on Kyushu, also at Maioka Park.
Grey Bunting ♦ *Emberiza variabilis* Exceptional views of two or three males coming to a feeding station at Mi-ike.
Common Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* Not uncommon at Arasaki.
Golden-crowned Sparrow *Zonotrichia atricapilla* A single vagrant first-year bird at Kiritappu.



Asian Rosy Finch



Yellow-throated Bunting



Forest Wagtail

MAMMALS

Japanese Hare *Lepus brachyurus* One seen at Mi-ike in the woods at night.

Eurasian Red Squirrel (Red S) *Sciurus vulgaris* A single seen at Nemuro.

Japanese Squirrel *Sciurus lis* A couple seen at Karuizawa.

Pallas's Squirrel (introduced) *Callosciurus erythraeus* Several seen in Maioka Park.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* Five individuals seen on Hokkaido, with big woolly coats

Northern Sea-Lion (Steller's S) *Eumetopias jubatus* A big thrill to see nine of these on the surface near Rausu.

Largha Seal (Spotted Seal) *Phoca largha* A couple seen around the Hokkaido coasts.

Harbour Seal (Common Seal) *Phoca vitulina* Quite a few seen around the Hokkaido coasts.

Japanese Macaque *Macaca fuscata* Four seen near Karuizawa, quite a few at Jigokudani though few in the hot tub!

Eurasian Wild Boar *Sus scrofa* Three along the road near Karuizawa.

Sika Deer *Cervus nippon* Quite a few seen at Karuizawa, common on Hokkaido.

Common Bottle-nosed Dolphin *Tursiops truncatus* Ten or more Dolphins by Mikurashima were likely to be this.

Japanese Serow *Capricornis crispus* Two seen in the woods at Karuizawa.



Red Fox



Sika Deer

NOTES TO THE SYSTEMATIC LIST

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 that were also on the pond at Katano Kamo-ike. 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*

Just 30+ were present at their usual wintering site at Katano Kamo-ike, far fewer than there are usually at this site. 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!

Short-tailed Albatross *Phoebastria albatrus*

Good numbers seen on our pelagic extension, with 21+ 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*

13 at Hitotsuse, four at Arasaki, one at Yatsushiro. 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*

A fantastic scene of 100+ around Rausu harbour. The concentrations of this huge beast in eastern Hokkaido are undoubtedly one of the world's greatest avian spectacles. 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.

Hooded Crane ♦ *Grus monacha*

The most numerous Crane at Arasaki, and although we never got a definitive number of those present this year, it is typically as many as 10,000 birds. 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!

Japanese Murrelet ♦ *Synthliboramphus wumizusume*

Great views at Kadogawa, despite our boat trip being cancelled. The 'Sea Sparrow' (the translation of the Japanese name) 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. We also saw a few in Tokyo Bay as we returned from our Izu Island pelagic. It is listed as 'Vulnerable' by Birdlife.

Blakiston's Fish Owl ♦ *Bubo blakistoni*

A great show by the male at Rausu, and not too long a wait. Apparently the old female disappeared, and the old male is now paired with one of his female offspring from two years previously. I hope they are very happy together!

Ural Owl ♦ *Strix uralensis*

A very dark individual seen at Mi-ike that is of the race *fuscescens*, and two on Hokkaido that were of the paler *japonica* race.

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus*

Seen on all three islands, three races observed. On Honshu the race concerned is *trivirgatus*, on Kyushu we saw birds of the race *kiusiuensis*, on Hokkaido we saw white-headed birds of the nominate *caudatus*.

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea*

Seen on all three islands, three races noted. 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*.



Ural Owl (photo by Lindsay Bradley)



Japanese Grosbeak



Dinner at Minshuku Washi-no-Yado, Rausu



Marsh Tit in ice, Hokkaido