

# TROPICAL BIRDING



## Japan in winter: birding on ice

Set Departure Tour: 10 – 24 February 2013

Leader: Keith Barnes. All photos taken on this tour

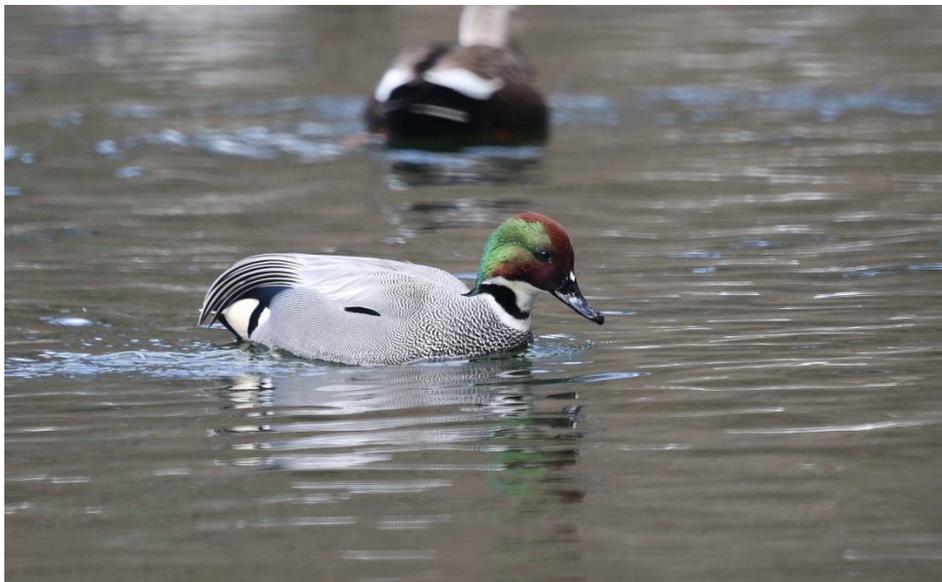


No introduction needed. One of the finest birds on Earth, Steller's Sea-Eagle, in one of the finest spectacles – gathering in their hundreds on the ice - near Rausu.

## INTRODUCTION

Earth can have no better winter birding destination than Japan. From the Japanese Alps to the Alaska-like seascapes of Hokkaido, powder snow and stark wild woodlands lend a dramatic backdrop to some of the finest avian spectacles on the planet. This, combined with quaint minshuku living, and a choice of food that was as delicious as it was variable, lent itself to an overwhelming kaleidoscope of experiences. With an early arriving participant, we decided to head up into the Alps for a pre-trip Snow Monkey extravaganza that would not disappoint. The small ryokan was elegant and spotless and sitting cross-legged eating an 8-course meal was a wonderful introduction to the exotic Far East. The next morning we enjoyed a few hours with monkeys frolicking in hot steam baths. Playing, and a few scuffles, punctuated laps of swimming, grooming and bathing and the photo-ops here were simply world-class. We returned to Tokyo, met up with most of the group and made our way through the busy Tokyo traffic to Kuruzawa. Our forays into the forest around Kuruzawa were very successful, with Japanese Pygmy and Japanese Green woodpeckers providing regular entertainment. We got very lucky with both Long-tailed and Pallas' rosefinches and Japanese Grosbeaks in town this year, and Rustic Buntings and Japanese Green Pheasant walking the overgrown fields. Several Falcated Duck on local ponds were very welcome. After dark excursions were frigid, but rewarding, with both Ural Owl and Japanese Flying Squirrel being highly sought quarry. The star of the show however was a delightful Copper Pheasant that snuck off uphill. With our time in the highlands drawing to a close we headed to Haneda and flew down to Kyushu. News had filtered through of a Scaly-sided Merganser pair. The locality revealed Crested Kingfisher and Long-billed Plover, but unfortunately we dipped the duck! As we headed through to Arasaki on dusk a dodgy scuffling ball of fluff in a field revealed itself to be none-other than an amazing Japanese Badger which was enjoyed by all. Our time at Arasaki was phenomenal, with a single young Siberian Crane being picked up in the mass of 8000 Hooded and 2000 White-naped cranes. We also located Sandhill and Eurasian to give us an amazing five-crane day! We enjoyed the warmer weather and picked up Daurian Jackdaw, Russet Sparrow, migrant thrushes and eventually a very nice Black-faced Spoonbill in the estuary, amongst the more regular collection of waterfowl and gulls. We also made a quick stop at some local Samurai residences at lunch, which made a fun short local diversion to appreciate some of the incredible history of Japan. En-route to Mi-ike we did a little more water birding, adding scoters and Mongolian Gull before checking into our minshuku, replete with amazing sulphur-steaming hot spring baths which I and Mark (our able tour coordinator) thoroughly enjoyed after dark! The wind bellowed at Mi-ike the following day, which made finding small passerines hard, but we prevailed, seeing Gray and Elegant Bunting and a lone, welcome, Mandarin Duck floating around on the lake. We soon had to head onwards, and we made it to Kadogawa in the mid-afternoon where our boatman was ready for us. We were to take a cruise into the Kadogawa Bay to look for the Vulnerable Japanese Murrelet. No sooner had we cleared the harbours' concrete walls and we nailed our first small group of this diminutive and scarce alcid! Over the next hour we got progressively better views and in the end saw it very well along with Temminck's Cormorant. We overnighted close to the airport, but before flying to Hokkaido the next day had a chance for a quick visit to a local estuary, where we lucked out with several Saunders's Gulls and at least 10 Black-faced Spoonbills. Arriving in Hokkaido we were struck by the sudden change in temperatures, and by that fact that it was getting dark by 16h30. But it also looked refreshing, mountainous, beautiful and crisp. We were up before dawn and stationed on the

Setsurigawa River bridge. As the sun rises, steam condenses in the frigid air and 30 Red-crowned Cranes bugle from their overnight roosting site in the riverbed. The dawn turned crimson, and the birds began to fly out and move to their feeding areas. It is a magical sight to behold. We returned for a leisurely breakfast and then hit the Akan crane center and waited for birds to come in and feed. Over the next few hours we enjoyed watching cranes dance, call and preen, mixing it up with small herds of Sika Deer that could not resist the corn grain put out for the cranes. It is one of the classic ornithological spectacles on the planet. We moved off towards Rausu, a spit of land exposed to the harshest of the Siberian pack-ice. En route we picked up immaculate wax-like Harlequin Duck, Stejneger's Scoter and our first White-tailed Eagles. That evening we waited up at our minshuku and were rewarded with remarkable views of the scarce Blakiston's Fish Owl eating in the stream less than 30 metres away from our room windows, while we were toast warm inside! Wonderful! The following morning we were up again pre-dawn for the most remarkable of the avian spectacles we were to see on this fabulous tour. Climbing aboard the boat it was not very long before we were in position on the pack-ice waiting for dawn to come. The red orb that is the symbol of Japan was soon floating above the horizon along with hundreds of the amazing White-tailed and gargantuan Steller's Sea-Eagles. The next couple of hours were simply magical as these behemoths scrapped for fish and bared their talons at one another and cameras clicked faster than a ticker-tape. Returning to harbor we scored our last few gulls and went looking for alcids, but could only really encounter distant birds. Heading to Nemuro, we decided to do a short pelagic trip, which turned out to be a major brainwave as this delivered excellent views of Least Auklet, Spectacled, Ancient and Pigeon guillemots, as well as Larga Seal. A junket to some nearby feeders revealed Asian Rosy-Finch and a surprise Sea Otter off the coast, and a rare Black Brant. With our tour pretty much over we indulged in some feeder birding the following morning before dropping folks off at the airport. Some of us did a pelagic back to Tokyo that added little of interest, but we were all quite gob-smacked by what a wonderful time we had all had in Japan and all agreed that this is the finest winter birding they had ever done.



Waterfowl are a feature of this tour, including a variety of East Asian specialties like this fabulous Falcated Duck.

## 8 February: Tokyo Bay pelagic

This was not part of the tour, but I am including the short write up here because it will form part of future Tropical Birding Japan itineraries. Only I (Keith Barnes) did this leg, which basically required getting down to the Takagawa Ferry Port in downtown Tokyo. By the time the sun rose we were sailing past the northernmost of the Izu islands, with steam rising from the cones of these volcanic islets. Gulls frolicked back and forth, but it was the procellariiform birds that were of the most interest here. Several hundred Streaked Shearwaters being the primary constituents, but eventually the larger Laysan Albatrosses started appearing and 20 odd were seen during the day. The arrival on Hachijo-jima permitted a 25 minute race around the scrub and gardens surrounding the harbor, where lo-and-behold, I did manage to find the smart and globally Vulnerable Izu Thrush before racing back on board. About half way back to Tokyo, I added the bird of the day, as a young Short-tailed Albatross made an extremely welcome appearance, at first quite distant, but eventually coming close enough for me to see the amazing pink beak of this scarce and globally threatened iconic seabird. Our success with the albatrosses has convinced us that this pelagic trip will be run for future Tropical Birding Japan itineraries.



The extremely localized Izu Thrush (left), and although it is a bad picture the Short-tailed Albatross on the right is cause for much celebration.

## 9 February: Nagano pre-trip

With a client arriving early I decided to head up into the Alps for an experience that I had not yet had, seeing the incredible Snow Monkeys of Nagano. They were not to disappoint. It took us a while to get there and we arrived at the quaint minshuku just on dark, and were treated to an introduction that only Japan can offer. A wonderful 8 course meal elegantly and immaculately prepared. The next morning we wondered about the snow a little before finding our way to the amazing hot springs that host one of the most famous troops of primates on Earth. We were not to be disappointed with much frolicking, fighting, canoodling and grooming as they monkeys played about in the pools. The pictures will hopefully do the experience justice. The area also produced a remarkable Japanese Serow, and our first Japanese Pygmy-Woodpecker and Varied Tit. Soon we were jetting our way back to Tokyo to meet up with the remainder of the group.



The Snow Monkeys (Japanese Macaque) are amongst the most famous primates on Earth. This family group spends a lot of time in the sulphuric waters of the onsen baths their antics are a joy to behold. As the photos show, we certainly had a good time with these amazing critters.

### **10 February: Tokyo to Karuizawa**

This morning, after picking everybody up from the hotel, we had a fairly long drive to the town of Karuizawa in the Japanese Alps of Nagano Prefecture. During the drive we started off our lists with some common birds like Great Cormorant, Great Egret, Grey Heron, and Black Kite. In the afternoon we arrived at our pension which was conveniently located for the following days of birding. We finished off the day with a bit of birding in the front yard, and a little way up the road looking at a few ponds where we located some immaculate Falcated Ducks, and a wonderful surprise Pallas's Rosefinch, although not all saw it well and we would have to return to see it better. The feeders were very good getting us our first looks at some endemics in the form of Japanese Pygmy- and

Japanese Green woodpeckers as well as Oriental Turtle Dove, Pied Wagtail, Brown-eared Bulbul, and Great Tit.



It is great when scarce and beautiful birds like this Japanese Green Woodpecker come right up to the minshuku's feeders!

### **11 February: Karuizawa**

The next two days were spent in the Karuizawa area where we explored a variety of wonderful localities, including fields, forests and ponds nestled on the slopes of the impressive Asamayama volcano. The local fields saw us getting great views of Meadow and Rustic Bunting as well the amazing Japanese Green Pheasant. The latter is Japan's national bird and an endemic taxon (although now only considered a sub-species of Ring-necked Pheasant by Clements). Later we enjoyed a short walk to the edge of 'Yacho no mori' (literally 'wild bird forest') where the undoubted highlight was a wonderful endemic Copper Pheasant slinking off up the slope. This is not an easy species to encounter, and we were very glad to have that under our belts, but we also saw some other nice forest birds, including the very smart Great Spotted Woodpecker, and the diminutive Japanese Pygmy-Woodpecker. We also saw endemic races of Long-tailed Tit, Eurasian Bullfinch, Willow Tit and a medley of other nice forest birds such as Coal Tit, Great Tit, the attractive Varied Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch, Brambling, Rustic Bunting and Grey-capped Greenfinch. We also took a short walk along the Yukawa where we saw the wonderful Brown Dipper. An evening excursion was very

successful for both feathers and fur, with both Ural Owl and Japanese Flying-Squirrel both seen very well.



Elsewhere in Kuruizawa we succeeded with many flock birds like Eurasian Nuthatch (above) and some spectacular migrants like the Red-flanked Bluetail (below)

## 12 February: Karuizawa

Today we spent exploring waterbodies and the forests a little more looking for passerines. We saw a great variety of waterfowl, including Little Grebe, Great Cormorant, Eurasian Wigeon, Eurasian Teal, Spot-billed Duck, Northern Pintail, Common Pochard, Tufted Duck, Common Merganser, Eurasian Moorhen and Eurasian Coot. We had a good haul of other birds during the day, including Common Buzzard, Japanese Pygmy-Woodpecker, Japanese Wagtail, Dusky Thrush, immaculate Red-flanked Bluetail, the beautiful Daurian Redstart, Long-tailed, Willow, Varied, Coal & Great Tits, Bull-headed Shrike, an endemic race of Eurasian Jay, Grey-capped Greenfinch, Black-faced, Meadow & Rustic Buntings, the introduced Chinese Hwamei and Japanese Macaques.



Varied Tit, the Japanese race here, is a spectacular and regular flock constituent.

## 13 February: Karuizawa to Arasaki

We had a really early departure from Kurizawa this morning as we were headed to Haneda Airport in Tokyo for our internal flight to Kagoshima on the southern island of Kyushu. As our plane approached the city some of us were treated to views of Sakurajima, one of the most active volcanos in Japan which overlooks Kagoshima. It was a good deal warmer than Tokyo when we arrived and after picking up our new vehicle we were on our way to Arasaki. The site of one of the greatest avian spectacles in Asia where over 10,000 cranes congregate every winter to take advantage of the feeding stations. En route however we stopped along a river that had recently held some amazing Scaly-sided Mergansers. Unfortunately we dipped on the mergansers, but we did see a great number of excellent species including Crested Kingfisher and Long-billed Plover. As the sun was setting a 'strange' shape in a field turned out to be none other than a Japanese Badger, an extremely fortuitous find! We arrived at Arasaki on dusk, and settled into our hotel for a great meal.



Japanese Badger, what a score!

#### **14 February: Arasaki**

We left at dawn to catch the sight of thousands of cranes flying in to the feeding station. We watched a beautiful sun rise as small and large groups of cranes flew overhead and landed in the fields. The majority were Hooded Cranes with many White-naped Cranes too. A handful of Common Cranes had shown up too, but the absolute highlight was the single young giant Siberian Crane that stalked the field along with a handful of Sandhills. So there we were, within a few minutes having nailed 5 species of crane, surely the only locality on Earth where this is possible. A flock of passing corvids revealed the rather dapper Daurian Jackdaw in the large flocks of Rooks, Carrion & Large-billed Crows, as well as fields full of Northern Lapwings. On overhead wires we had some Grey-capped Greenfinches. After enjoying the feeding spectacle, we drove to the crane centre where we enjoyed their interpretative museum. A walk in some nearby fields produced Common Reed Bunting, Bull-headed Shrike, Japanese Grosbeak and Daurian Redstart and a few Russet Sparrows amongst the hundreds of Eurasian Tree Sparrows. From the centre we saw a remarkable Bewick's Swan that seemed rather lost, before heading with lunch to a local set of former Samurai homes for a short cultural interlude. The afternoon was enjoyed at some local estuaries, where we found our first real gulls, some shorebirds, a bunch more ducks and 2 spoonbills standing together, remarkably, one was a Eurasian, and one was a Black-faced. How convenient is that! We took a short drive along the coast and found a nice area of scrub with Pale Thrush, Japanese Bush Warbler, Black-faced & Meadow Buntings. We explored local rice fields where we found Eurasian Skylark & Buff-bellied Pipit and another estuary with Black-tailed & Slaty-backed Gulls, and Black-necked Grebe. We returned to our hotel satisfied with a good day.



Cranes are the feature of the day, and they did not disappoint with 5 species being seen in about 10 minutes. The numbers of Hooded (above) and White-naped (below) cranes is what truly creates this most remarkable spectacle though.

### **15 February: Arasaki to Miike**

We were leaving Izumi in Kagoshima prefecture and heading to the neighbouring Miyazaki prefecture. On the way we stopped at an estuary where we saw the only Mongolian and Heuglin's Gulls of the trip, Little & Black-necked Grebes, Great Cormorant, Eurasian Wigeon, Eurasian Teal, Spot-billed Duck, and Tufted Duck. In the afternoon we made our way to Miike, a beautiful volcanic lake overshadowed by one of the most active volcanoes in Japan. So recently active that the whole area was closed off two years ago. Unfortunately, it was blowing an absolute howler, and getting good looks at birds, especially the target buntings was particularly tricky. We flushed many Gray Buntings, but few would perch for views, but fortunately eventually found a single Mandarin Duck floating in the ponds which was some reward for the effort. We all had good scope views of a stunning male of what is arguably the most beautiful duck in the world. We did see other waterfowl such as Great Cormorant, Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler and woodland birds, but these had all been seen before. It was time to start heading back to the hotel which was a

spectacular hot spring minshuku where some of us took the opportunity and took a dip in their wonderful hot pools before making our way to dinner, which was a lavish and enjoyable affair with several delicious courses.



The elegant Dusky Thrush is a great bird to be seeing regularly throughout the trip.

### **16 February: Miike to Kadogawa**

We returned to Miike for a short time in the morning and were much more successful with better looks at both Gray and Elegant Buntings. We had a long way to go, and losing no time we started our drive to the east coast of Kyushu island. On our way out, we had Common Buzzard in the fields along with countless Bull-headed Shrike which were very common. We got to Kadogawa and had lunch while Mark and I found the boat skipper to check on protocol, as today we would be heading out into the Kagogawa Bay, to head around some small islands where the Japanese Murrelet's, a rare and vulnerable alcid, breed. We were soon on the boat and although Howard was a little nervous about motion sickness we were soon enjoying great views of Temminck's Cormorants. Not long after that a shout went up and we located our first 'pod' of pied Japanese Murrelets. The allowed quite close approach, and we continued to see them throughout the afternoon, getting a minimum of 8 different birds. We approached a variety of rock stacks where we saw fishermen leap to and from boats in treacherous conditions – I must say – fishing is a serious business in Japan. We returned to the bay delighted, and continued to our hotel for the night.



Bird of the day was undoubtedly the immaculate, scarce and globally threatened Japanese Murrelet, of which we saw at least 12.

### **17 February: Miyazaki to Kushiro**

Although we had to head to the airport for a travel day today, we were able to make a quick stop at the nearby Hitotsusegawa estuary. We saw loads of Black-faced Spoonbill – 10 at least – and several Saunders Gull which were some of the main targets. We also saw Great Crested Grebe, Black-tailed and Vega Gulls, Eurasian Skylark giving its beautiful song and Northern Lapwing in fields nearby. We didn't have a lot of time though, and soon had to make for the airport as today was mainly a travel day. From Miyazaki airport we flew to Tokyo where we had lunch in the airport before boarding our connecting flight to Kushiro on the northern island of Hokkaido, the most visually stunning part of Japan. Here was a drastically different climate and the freezing cold air hit us as soon as we stepped outside the airport. We picked up our hire car and drove to the nearby town of Akan and our hotel which was just across the road from the Akan Crane Centre. But it was already getting dark, and we stilled ourselves for the amazing sights we would be seeing the following morning.



Hokkaido scenery – the Alaska of the Far East

## 18 February: Akan - Rausu

We awoke before dawn and made our way to the Setsurigawa River. As the sun rose, dawn greeted us with about 25 Red-crowned Cranes nested in the river at their roosting grounds. The mist rising off the river and purples and reds of dawn make for an unforgettable scene.



We headed back to Akan for breakfast, then we walked to the centre and watched the Red-crowned Cranes arriving at the feeding grounds and displaying; taking photos in the soft morning light. The first of the virtually all white beasts came in to land, before another and another. Soon we were amongst a flock of Red-crowned Cranes. A major star bird on this tour and arguably the world's best looking crane. They danced, bugled and pranced. We also had several Sika Deer coming in to share the grain. By 9am the cranes were in the full swing, vocalizing with pairs strutting up and down mirroring each other's postures. It was a wonderful display and everything we had hoped for. We also had Whooper Swans fly over and Eurasian Jay and Willow Tit were seen in the nearby trees.

We checked out of our hotel and headed towards the Notsuke Peninsula. This coastline holds some of the finest near-shore birding in the world and we were soon enjoying rafts of the gorgeous Harlequin Duck. Looking like wax-moulded statues they bobbed and played in the nearby surf along with Common Goldeneye, Greater Scaup, stunning winter-plumage Long-tailed Duck, Black Scoter, White-winged Scoter, Smew, Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander. A veritable feast of stunning waterfowl. At the beginning of the peninsular there was a parking area from where we had views over the frozen sea with a few patches of open water with Common Scoters. We drove on a bit and saw our first Steller's Sea Eagle from which point on they became common with White-tailed Eagle also present. We had a rather cold looking Dusky Thrush followed by our first Slaty-backed & Glaucous Gulls. Some more birding from the various overlooks produced Red-breasted Merganser, Common Goldeneye and many more scoters. We headed north along coast towards Rausu and stopped at a port just south of Rausu which was a good spot for photography. Here we had close views of Pelagic Cormorant, Harlequin Duck, Common Goldeneye and Red-breasted Merganser inside the harbor.



Red-crowned Cranes, watching these elegant birds dance, bugle and croon is surely one of the most magical sights in the bird world.

It was also a good place for gulls, with Black-headed, Slaty-backed, Glaucous & Glaucous-winged present. We were pretty well frozen by now and it was a relief to thaw ourselves out in our very warm and friendly family-run pension which also had delicious food. But perhaps the coolest thing of the day was that valley was lined with at least 30 roosting Steller's Sea-Eagles when we arrived at the front door. The proprietor does not speak any English, but is an incredibly welcoming figure indeed. By day, this place hardly looked like the mecca to find one of the world's finest species of owl. But by the photography gear that was already outside, it obviously was. A tank is sunk into the river bed and baited with fish. Some nights, but not every night, the incredible Blakiston's Fish Owl comes to eat here. There are only 100 odd individual birds on Japan, so this is a scarce beast indeed, and sometimes this vigil can last for 6-8 hours, and occasionally and worryingly, the birds do not show at all. After some discussion, we found our rooms. The 5 course homemade Japanese meal was a serious treat, and Keith and Mark ably volunteered for all the sashimi courses that went begging. Scrumptious! We were told the heaters were on in our rooms, which all had views of the tank, and we would be called if the owl showed up. Propping up our chairs I had bought quite a few liters of the delicious Mr Brown's Coffee cans, just in case we needed stimulants through the night. Reaching down to grab my first can, and mentally preparing myself for the vigil, a deep boom of a Blakiston's Fish Owl came from behind the pension, and a shadow cast through the spotlight. An immense Blakiston's Fish Owl had landed in a tree nearby. The shadow moved again, and the giant brown shape of the owl soared down onto the ice-covered river where it ate pickings to its heart's content. After a few minutes, the big brown owl took to the air and vanished. A true phantom.



Blakiston's Fish Owl: Not a bad way to finish off the day!

## 19th February: Rausu

This morning was our long-awaited boat trip to photograph the Steller's Sea Eagle. The ice-floes were in, and we were very expectant. It was frigid and we were on board of a large-decked boat, moving through the pack-ice. In the distance was the mirage of the Kuril islands, part of the Russian frontier. The ice crunched as the bow of the boat broke off huge chunks before advancing clumsily. Suddenly an airborne chocolate-and-white leviathan appeared from the starboard side of the boat. Its golden beak and startling yellow eye caught the attention as it cruised past, silently. The Steller's Sea-Eagle came in to land on the ice. Its talons slid on the 'white-rock' as it settled, and it spread its giant wings to steady itself. The massive size of this bird is seconded only by its incredible form. Huge yellow feet, talons wedged into the ice, the snowy-colored forewings and white pantaloons are set against a shaggy brown and chocolate plumage and a massive beak, the second largest in the eagle world. But the most impressive aspect of this experience is that 100s more Steller's Sea-Eagles were scattered on the ice in front of us. Approaching the sheer spectacle of having hundreds of this relatively scarce species gorging themselves on fish scraps makes it impossible to resist as one of the top ten birds in the world, at least in my view! They entertained us for over 2 hours and we had countless close-range, eye-level flybys, landings, takings off, squabbling on the ice and aerial dog fights. It was an amazing spectacle and remains one of the best bird photography opportunities on the planet. As well as eagles, we also had Black-headed, Slaty-backed & Glaucous Gulls flying around in the hope of scraps. In the harbour on the way back were Pelagic Cormorant, Common Goldeneye and Red-breasted Merganser. We spent the remainder of the morning scoping sea-capes, but unfortunately could only add rather unsatisfying views of several alcids, which were fortunately to improve on later in the tour when we took another pelagic trip off Ochiishi. That evening we had to wait a little longer, but eventually I looked out our window to see the Blakiston's Fish Owl hunched over the pond in a hunting posture. I alerted everyone again and we all had great repeat views of this owl. We watched sleepily as it caught a couple of fish before flying off. What a set up they had there! It certainly beats standing out in the freezing cold.





It is almost impossible not to take incredible pictures of both White-tailed Eagle (above) and Steller's Sea-Eagle (below) on this amazing short boat trip.

## **20 February: Rausu to Furneko**

We checked out and started our drive towards Furenko, where we would spend the next 2 nights. Our first birding stop was at Hakuchodai (literally 'swan platform'): A great viewpoint over the sea where we did actually see many Whooper Swans close to the coast. We also had great views of Smew and some other rarer ducks as we made our way back towards Kushiro. We made it to the Nemuro area for lunch where we could overlook Lake Furen at a nice service area where they had a scope set up on young Steller's Sea Eagles out on the frozen lake surface. We then decided to head out to a local peninsula to look for some goodies we were still missing. We came up trumps with a large flock of Asian Rosy-Finch, and the promontory proved good for Horned and Red-necked Grebe and a rather amazing Sea Otter, a once very scarce animal which is fortunately becoming commoner in Japan. We also had a lone Black Brant and our first Kamchatka 'Mew' Gulls. Distant scanning revealed Pigeon Guillemot, but we were to get much better looks at that the following day.

## **21 February: Ochiishi and Nemuro Peninsula**

The first order of business today was a pelagic trip off Cape Ochiishi. It certainly did not disappoint, and after the limited and poor views we had had of alcids thus far, we were all very pleased to get proper looks at six species of alcids this morning in quick time, including the likes of Common Murre, Pigeon (Snow's) Guillemot, spectacular Spectacled Guillemot, Ancient Murrelet, Least Auklet (many), and Crested Auklet (one!). That took our alcid haul for the tour to 8, and all the species were seen very well. The cruise also scored Larga Seal. We spent the afternoon scanning and scoping various promontories, and were rewarded with many great birds, but our only addition was a Red-faced Cormorant, a spectacularly beautiful beast.



The pelagic off Ochiishi delivered on its promise and we had fabulous views of at least 6 alcids, including this amazing Spectacled Guillemot, taking our alcid tally for the tour to eight.

## 22 February: Nemoro to Kushiro

In the morning we enjoyed our final birding at breakfast with some Great Spotted Woodpecker, Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, Great Tit and Eurasian Nuthatch from the warmth of the inside. We also took time to work through the distinguishing features of the very similar Willow & Marsh Tits before making our way back to Kushiro where we dropped off those not joining the pelagic extension.

## 22 – 24 February HOKKAIDO TO HONSHU PELAGIC CRUISE EXTENSION

We boarded our express train to Sapporo and from there our connecting bus to the Oarai ferry terminal where we boarded our boat for the extension. We were keen to get our day started and straight after breakfast we were up on deck birding. It was very cold and windy but we started seeing some new birds for the tour, like Northern Fulmar and Black-legged Kittiwake. Gulls were well represented with Black-tailed, Slaty-backed and Mew Gulls (sometimes split as Kamchatka Gull). We took several breaks inside to warm up, and after lunch the ocean became very quiet indeed with virtually nothing added. Fortunately we had done so well in Ochiishi, so the disappointment of the alcids here was not too overwhelming. We spent the night in the town of Mito and the following day went back to Tokyo where we finished our unforgettable trip.

## List of Bird Species recorded

Sequence and taxonomy follows Clements, J. F. (2000) *Birds of the World: A Checklist*. All species seen by tour leader and at least one participant unless otherwise annotated. LO = leader only. H = heard only.

**Little Grebe** *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

**Great Crested Grebe** *Podiceps cristata*

**Red-necked Grebe** *Podiceps gisegena*

**Horned (Slavonian) Grebe** *Podiceps auritus*

**Eared (Black-necked) Grebe** *Podiceps nigricollis*

**Laysan Albatross** *Phoebastria immutabilis* – **LO** – 20 odd individuals seen only on the Tokyo Bay Pelagic run prior to the tour by the tour leader

**Short-tailed Albatross** *Phoebastria albatrus* – **LO** – 1 sub-adult bird seen only on the Tokyo Bay Pelagic run prior to the tour by the tour leader

**Streaked Shearwater** *Calonectris leucomelas* – **LO** – a few birds seen only on the Tokyo Bay Pelagic run prior to the tour by the tour leader

**Northern Fulmar** *Fulmaricus glacialis*

**Great Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax carbo*

**Japanese (Temminck's) Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax filamentosus*

**Pelagic Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax pelagicus*

**Red-faced Cormorant** *Phalacrocorax urile*

**Black-crowned Night-Heron** *Nycticorax nycticorax*

**Pacific Reef Heron** *Egretta sacra*

**Little Egret** *Egretta garzetta*

**Great Egret** *Casmerodius albus*

**Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea*

**Eurasian Spoonbill** *Platalea leucorodia*  
**Black-faced Spoonbill** *Platalea minor*  
**Whooper Swan** *Cygnus cygnus*  
**Tundra (Bewick's) Swan** *Cygnus columbianus bewickii*  
**(Black) Brant** *Branta bernicla orientalis*  
**Common Shelduck** *Tadorna tadorna*  
**Mandarin Duck** *Aix galericulata*  
**Eurasian Wigeon** *Anas penelope*  
**American Wigeon** *Anas americana*  
**Falcated Duck** *Anas falcata*  
**Gadwall** *Anas strepera*  
**Green-winged (Eurasian) Teal** *Anas crecca*  
**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos*  
**Eastern Spot-billed Duck** *Anas zonorhyncha*  
**Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta*  
**Northern Shoveller** *Anas clypeata*  
**Common Pochard** *Aythya ferina*  
**Tufted Duck** *Aythya fuligula*  
**Greater Scaup** *Aythya marila*  
**Harlequin Duck** *Histrionicus histrionicus*  
**Long-tailed Duck** *Clangula hyemalis*  
**Black Scoter** *Melanitta americana*  
**White-winged (Siberian) Scoter** *Melanitta fusca stejnegeri*  
**Common Goldeneye** *Bucephala clangula*  
**Smew** *Mergus albellus*  
**Common Merganser (Goosander)** *Mergus merganser*  
**Red-breasted Merganser** *Mergus serrator*  
**Black (-eared) Kite** *Milvus migrans*  
**White-tailed Sea-Eagle** *Haliaeetus albicilla*  
**Stellar's Sea-Eagle** *Haliaeetus pelagicus*  
**Eurasian Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus*  
**Japanese (Common) Buzzard** *Buteo buteo japonicus*  
**Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos*  
**Osprey** *Pandion haliaetus*  
**Eurasian Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus*  
**Peregrine Falcon** *Falco peregrinus*  
**Copper Pheasant** *Symaticus soemmerringii* – this scarce bird was seen surprisingly well as it moved slowly up the hill near Kuruizawa.  
**Ring-necked (Japanese Green) Pheasant** *Phasianus versicolor*  
**Eurasian Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus*  
**Eurasian Coot** *Fulica atra*  
**Siberian Crane** *Grus leucogeranus*  
**Common Crane** *Grus grus*  
**Hooded Crane** *Grus monacha*  
**Sandhill Crane** *Grus canadensis*  
**White-naped Crane** *Grus vipio*  
**Red-crowned Crane** *Grus japonensis*  
**Long-billed Plover** *Charadrius placidus*  
**Northern Lapwing** *Vanellus vanellus*  
**Dunlin** *Calidris alpina*  
**Common Snipe** *Gallinago gallinago*

**Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus*  
**Common Sandpiper** *Actitis hypoleucos*  
**Black-legged (Pacific) Kittiwake** *Rissa tridactylus*  
**Saunders's Gull** *Larus saundersi*  
**Common Black-headed Gull** *Larus ridibundus*  
**Black-tailed Gull** *Larus crassirostris*  
**Mew (Kamchatka) Gull** *Larus canus kamtschatschensis*  
**Herring (Vega) Gull** *Larus argentatus vegae*  
**Caspian (Mongolian) Gull** *Larus cachinnans mongolicus*  
**Lesser Black-backed (Heuglin's) Gull** *Larus fuscus heuglini*  
**Slaty-backed Gull** *Larus schistisagus*  
**Glaucous-winged Gull** *Larus glaucescens*  
**Glaucous Gull** *Larus hyperboreus*  
**Common Murre (Guillemot)** *Uria aalge*  
**Thick-billed Murre** *Uria lomvia*  
**Pigeon (Snow's) Guillemot** *Cephus columba snowi*  
**Spectacled Guillemot** *Cephus carbo*  
**Ancient Murrelet** *Synthliboramphus antiquus*  
**Japanese Murrelet** *Synthliboramphus wumizusume*  
**Least Auklet** *Aethia pusilla*  
**Crested Auklet** *Aethia cristella*  
**Oriental Turtle-Dove** *Streptopelia orientalis*  
**Feral Pigeon** *Columba livea*  
**Blakiston's Fish-Owl** *Ketupa blakistoni*  
**Ural Owl** *Strix uralensis*  
**Common Kingfisher** *Alcedo atthis*  
**Crested Kingfisher** *Ceryle lugubris*  
**Japanese Green Woodpecker** *Picus awokera*  
**Great Spotted Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos major*  
**Japanese Pygmy-Woodpecker** *Dendrocopos kizuki*  
**Eurasian (Japanese) Skylark** *Alauda arvensis japonicus*  
**American (Buff-bellied) Pipit** *Anthus rubescens*  
**Gray Wagtail** *Motacilla cinerea*  
**White Wagtail** *Motacilla alba*  
**Japanese Wagtail** *Motacilla grandis*  
**Brown-eared Bulbul** *Hypsipetes amaurotis*  
**Brown Dipper** *Cinclus pallasii*  
**Eurasian Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes*  
**Red-flanked Bluetail** *Tarsiger cyanurus*  
**Daurian Redstart** *Phoenicurus aureus*  
**Blue Rock Thrush** *Monticola solitarius phillippensis*  
**Scaly (White's) Thrush** *Zoothera dauma*  
**Pale Thrush** *Turdus pallidus*  
**Izu Thrush** *Turdus celaenops* **LO** – 1 individual seen only on the Tokyo Bay Pelagic run prior to the tour by the tour leader  
**Dusky Thrush** *Turdus naumanni eunomys*  
**Japanese Bush Warbler** *Cettia diphone*  
**Golden-headed Cisticola** *Cisticola juncidis*  
**Goldcrest** *Regulus regulus*  
**Long-tailed Tit** *Aegithalos caudatus*  
**Marsh Tit** *Parus palustris*

**Willow Tit** *Parus montanus*  
**Varied Tit** *Parus varius*  
**Coal Tit** *Parus ater*  
**Great Tit** *Parus major*  
**Eurasian Nuthatch** *Sitta europea*  
**Japanese White-eye** *Zosterops japonica*  
**Bull-headed Shrike** *Lanius bucephalus*  
**Eurasian Jay** *Garrulus glandarius (japponicus & brandti)*  
**Daurian Jackdaw** *Corvus dauuricus*  
**Rook** *Corvus frugilegus*  
**Carrion Crow** *Corvus corone*  
**Large-billed Crow** *Corvus macrorhynchos*  
**White-cheeked Starling** *Sturnus cineraceus*  
**Common Starling** *Sturnus vulgaris* NL – Stuart saw one of these at Arasaki and thought nothing more of it, when he showed me the photo later I gagged, it is quite a scarce vagrant in Japan!  
**Russet Sparrow** *Passer rutilans*  
**Eurasian Tree Sparrow** *Passer montanus*  
**Brambling** *Fringilla montifringilla*  
**Grey-capped Greenfinch** *Carduelis sinica*  
**Eurasian Siskin** *Carduelis spinus*  
**Asian Rosy Finch** *Leucosticte arctoa*  
**Pallas's Rosefinch** *Carpodacus roseus*  
**Long-tailed Rosefinch** *Uragus sibiricus*  
**Eurasian (Grey-bellied) Bullfinch** *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*  
**Japanese Grosbeak** *Eophona personata*  
**Hawfinch** *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*  
**Grey Bunting** *Emberiza variabilis*  
**Black-faced Bunting** *Emberiza spodocephala*  
**Meadow Bunting** *Emberiza cioides*  
**Chestnut-eared Bunting** *Emberiza fucata*  
**Yellow-throated Bunting** *Emberiza elegans*  
**Rustic Bunting** *Emberiza rustica*  
**Common Reed Bunting** *Emberiza schoeniculus*

## Mammals

**Japanese Squirrel** *Sciurus lis*  
**Japanese Flying-squirrel** *Callosciurus erythraeus*  
**Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes*  
**Japanese Badger** *Meles anakuma*  
**Sea Otter** *Enhydra lutris*  
**Largha Seal (Spotted Seal)** *Phoca largha*  
**Harbour (Common) Seal** *Phoca vitulina*  
**Japanese Macaque (Snow Monkey)** *Macaca fuscata*  
**Sika Deer** *Cervus Nippon*  
**Japanese Serow** *Capricornis crispus*

By all accounts we had a remarkable trip for mammals, with all of the above been seen well. Japan is not particularly well known for its mammals. Regardless we were of course very happy with our haul of strange and quite impressive mammalian cast.



Japanese Serow was one of a remarkable number of mammals we encountered on this remarkable tour.

