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Custom JAPAN: ***Cranes and winter specialties***

20 - 25 March 2009

Leader: Keith Barnes

All photos by Keith Barnes

Custom tour



Cranes, cranes, cranes – that is what Japan in winter is all about.

This trip was a quickfire junket to the islands of Japan to nab the winter specialties. The clients had already done a Japan trip in summer and had spent considerable time in eastern Asia already, meaning that a few East Asia specialty birds like Black-faced Spoonbill and Baer's Pochard were not target species. The group had also already seen almost all of the Japanese endemics and summer specialty birds. With so few days at our disposal, we visited only a few strategic birding sites on Kyushu (Arasaki) and Hokkaido (Kushiro, Lake Furen, Nemuro and Rausu) and finished off with a pelagic ferry trip

returning to Honshu (Tomakomai – Ooarai). On this very short 5-and-a-half day trip we scored 110 species including all 22 target species that the clients asked me to design the trip around.

March 20. Kagoshima to Arasaki

We arrived in Kagoshima at midday, and shot straight up the east coast to a site known for its Japanese Murrelet. This bird, which can be quite a severe problem, was easy this time, with a handful bobbing about in the placid waters of the bay. No sooner had we seen the bird and we stared marking our way to Arasaki and the phenomenal crane reserve there. We arrived shortly after dark, but could hear the cacophony outside, with cranes bugling in the dark. It made the anticipation of morning barely workable. We headed out for a few Kirins (the highly drinkable Japanese lager) and some wonderful food at the nearby Dim-sum and noodle restaurant. Morning could not come soon enough.

March 21. Arasaki and surrounds

The air this morning was biting. In fact, it was freezing. We wrapped ourselves up and braved the outdoors. With warm breath condensing on the cold air we were soon amongst throngs of cranes. The experience is phenomenal, and surely one of the great ornithological treats of the world. Some 8000 Hooded and 500 White-naped Cranes were still at the reserve and to watch them preening, bugling, flying to and fro at just a few metres away was a treat of note. Some diligent scanning revealed Sandhill and Common Crane amongst them, but no Siberian unfortunately. After a quick breakfast we headed off to bird the surrounding estuary and riverine fringes south of the crane reserve, adding Long-billed Plover, a spectacular 40 Mandarin Duck and Japanese Cormorant. The river and the adjacent scrub offered up a scamp of a Brown Dipper and the dapper little Chinese Penduline Tit. The migrant Black-faced and Meadow Buntings were in attendance in the scruffy seeding grasses. A harbour nearby offered a fantastic opportunity to compare the various plumages of Slaty-backed, Vega and Black-tailed Gulls. A scrubby hillside soon delivered Bull-headed Shrike, Green Pheasant, as well as migrant Daurian Redstart, Pale and Dusky Thrushes. Scanning some open fields revealed the impressive Eurasian (Japanese) Skylark and Buff-bellied Pipit. We'd run out of time on Kyushu and we had to rush back the airport to catch our flight up to the northern island of Hokkaido, where we spent the night in the town of Kushiro. Although the largest city in the northwest, this town barely seems like bustling Japan at all. It has a friendly country-like vibe. However there can be no doubting that the people of Hokkaido are foodies, and seeing that most of the group liked seafood Japanese-style we indulged at a local specialty restaurant called the 'Crabber'. Here we ate crab at least 17 different ways, each equally delicious.





Black-eared Kites (top), hooded Crane in flight (middle), 8000 Hooded Cranes (bottom left) and 2000 White-naped Cranes gather at Arasaki each year. It is a spectacular ornithological spectacle.

March 22: Kushiro to Nemuro

We started this morning with warm coffee standing next to a field renowned for another of the world's great ornithological displays, and another crane-treat. The first of the virtually all white beasts came in to land, before another and another. We were amongst a flock of Japanese Red-crowned Cranes. A major star bird on this tour and arguably the world's best looking crane. The danced, bugled and pranced for us, eventually more and more arrived to feed in the fields. After this morning's early activities we were soon scouring the bays and cliffs of the northern Hokkaido coastline, picking up a variety of impressive seaducks. 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 Oldsquaw, Black Scoter, White-winged Scoter, Smew, Red-breasted Merganser and Goosander. A veritable feast of stunning waterfowl. A nice find was a fine Red-necked Grebe close to the shoreline. Getting closer to Nemuro we found the edge of Lake Furen. A stunning semi-arctic landscape. At first we could see hoardes of White-tailed Sea Eagle, but no Stellar's. A little worrying as this trip was a little later than regular winter trips to Japan and a lot of the landscape had already changed from its mid-winter look. A herd of Sika Deer crossed the frozen ice, pausing to drink in the trickle that remainder in this frozen landscape, before plunging into the frigid waters. Before long the light was fading, and our thoughts wandered to the concept of another sumptuous meal.



The spectacular Red-crowned Crane is a real sight to behold

March 23: Nemuro – Rausu

This morning we worked the Nemuro Peninsula, seeing many of the birds we'd seen yesterday. In particular we were looking for two specialty species and we saw them, amazingly, on the same rocky promontory. First was the giant Stellar's Sea Eagle. A bird of immense proportions. It was a little distant, but even then, the massive bill and stark plumage were obvious enough to redeem its reputation as one of the world's most desired raptors. Just below it, perched amongst many Pelagic Cormorants, was a single breeding-plumaged Red-faced Cormorant. This scarce bird is always a welcome find. The wind was howling and cold, and it was hard to stand outside for any length of time. Fortunately there was a wheeling flock of gulls nearby, and we were able to compare Slaty-backed, Glaucous-winged, Glaucous and Kamchatka (Common) Gulls. We headed to Rausu where we checked into our Minshuku (small guest-run homestay), where 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 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, and much hand-waving, we found our rooms. The 5 course homemade Japanese meal was a serious treat, and now 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 shadow cast through the spotlight. An immense Blakiston's Fish Owl had landed in a tree nearby, but was not visible. "Oh God, where is it, I cannot take the tension" was one cry. The shadow moved again, and only a few feet away this beast landed in the river bed and began picking fish from the tank. After a few minutes, the big brown owl took to the air and vanished. A true phantom. It returned several times through the night, giving us all repeated and saturating views. Another mega was under the belt.



The WOW factor. A night with Blakiston's Fish-Owl is unforgettable, a giant bird in the snow!

March 24: Rausu area - Tomokomai

This morning was really about a boat trip, particularly to try for better views of Steallr's Sea Eagle. Oh Boy did we get them. It was a frigid cold morning and we were on board of a large-decked boat, moving through the pack-ice. In the distance the mirage was 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! Amongst the gulls and other common birds we had close up views of several alcids, including Common Guillemot, Spectacled Guillemot and Ancient Murrelet. A short land-based excursion in some woodlands brought us Common Redpoll, Asian Rosy Finch and Hawfinch. We made our long trek back to Kushiro and then flew to Saporro and caught a train to Tomokomai, where we boarded our massive ferry that was docked in the harbour. Japan offers some of the most comfortable pelagic cruising on planet earth, as you can overnight in comfortable rooms, the boats have restaurants and they are so massive that they are very stable. The ferry left shortly after midnight, and we agreed to be on deck at dawn.

March 25: Oorai – Narita International Airport

We awoke to blissfully calm waters somewhere off the northern coast of Honshu. The day would be one full of birds, particularly the common gulls. Not too many species but all quality. Most abundantly we had Common, Brunich's and Spectacled Guillemot, with thousands of Ancient Murrelets everywhere. Of the procellariiformes Streaked Shearwater was nothing short of abundant. Picking our way through the alcids we eventually scored Least Auklet, Crested Auklet and Rhinoceros Auklet. A couple of Black-footed Albatrosses were a real treat, but the trip was also punctuated with a few Short-tailed Shearwater and Tristram's Storm-petrel. A handful of the beautiful Larga Seals made an appearance. Further south we picked up Parasitic Jaeger, Pomerine Jaeger and Black-legged Kittiwake, before we docked at Oorai just on dusk. Using a host of busses, trains and taxis we eventually made it to Narita for our flights out of Japan having crammed as much into 5 days as we could possibly manage.

BIRD LIST

Taxonomic order and nomenclature follow Clements, 6th edition updated 2007.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*
Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*
Japanese Cormorant *Phalacrocorax filamentosus*
Red-faced Cormorant *Phalacrocorax urile*
Pelagic Cormorant *Phalacrocorax pelagicus*
Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*
Bean Goose *Anser fabialis*
Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*
Spot-billed Duck *Anas poecilorhyncha*
Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca*
Mandarin Duck *Aix galericulata*
Pintail *Anas acuta*
Wigeon *Anas penelope*
Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula*
Greater Scaup *Aythya marila*
Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus*
Oldsquaw *Clangula hyemalis*
Black Scoter *Melanitta nigra*

White-winged Scoter *Melanitta fusca*
Smew *Mergus albellus*
Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator*
Goosander *Mergus merganser*
Common Guillemot *Uria aalge*
Brunnich's Guillemot *Uria lomvia*
Spectacled Guillemot *Cephus carbo*
Japanese Murrelet *Synthliboramphus wumizusume*
Ancient Murrelet *Synthliboramphus antiquus*
Least Auklet *Aethia pusilla*
Crested Auklet *Aethia cristella*
Rhincoceros Auklet *Cerorhinca monocerata*
Black-footed Albatross *Diomedea nigripes*
Streaked Shearwater *Calonectris leucomelas*
Short-tailed Shearwater *Puffinus tenuirostris*
Tristram's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma tristrami*
Parasitic Jaeger *Stercorarius parasiticus*
Pomarine Jaeger *Stercorarius pomarinus*
Slaty-backed Gull *Larus schistisagus*
Vega Gull *Larus vegae*
Black-tailed Gull *Larus crassirostris*
Glaucous-winged Gull *Larus glaucescens*
Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus*
Kamchatka (Common) Gull *Larus (canus) kamchatkensis*
Black-legged Kittiwake *Larus tridactylus*
Black-crowned Night Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*
Cattle Egret *Bubulcus ibis*
Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*
Great Egret *Egretta alba*
Gray Heron *Ardea cinerea*
Common Crane *Grus grus*
Hooded Crane *Grus monacha*
Sandhill Crane *Grus canadensis*
Japanese Red-crowned Crane *Grus japonensis*
White-naped Crane *Grus vipio*
Long-billed Plover *Charadrius placidus*
Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius*
Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus*
Red-necked Phalarope *Phalaropus lobatus*
Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*
White-tailed Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*
Stellar's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus*
Black (-eared) Kite *Milvus migrans*
Rough-legged Buzzard *Buteo lagopus*
Japanese (Common) Buzzard *Buteo buteo japonicus*
Blakiston's Fish Owl *Ketupa blakistoni*

Chinese Bamboo Partridge *Bambuscola thoracica* (h)
Green Pheasant *Phasianus versicolor*
Grey-faced Woodpecker *Picus canus*
Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*
(Japanese) Skylark *Alauda arvensis japonicus*
Asian House Martin *Delichon dasyapses*
Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*
Gray Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*
White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*
Black-backed Wagtail *Motacilla lugens*
Japanese Wagtail *Motacilla grandis*
Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni*
Buff-bellied Pipit *Anthus rubescens*
Brown-eared Bulbul *Hypsipetes amaurotis*
Bull-headed Shrike *Lanius bucephalus*
Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasi*
Daurian Redstart *Phoenicurus aureus*
Blue (Red-breasted) Rockthrush *Monticola solitarius phillipensis*
Pale Thrush *Turdus pallidus*
Dusky Thrush *Turdus naumanni eunomys*
Japanese Bush Warbler *Cettia diphone*
Marsh Tit *Parus palustris*
Willow Tit *Parus montanus*
Coal Tit *Parus ater*
Great Tit *Parus major*
Chinese Penduline Tit *Remiz consobrinus*
Varied Tit *Parus varius*
Nuthatch *Sitta europea asiatica*
Brown Creeper *Certhia familiaris*
Japanese White-eye *Zosterops japonica*
Siberian Meadow Bunting *Emberiza cioides*
Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala*
Oriental Greenfinch *Carduelis sinica*
Common Redpoll *Acanthis flammea*
Asian Rosy Finch *Leucosticte arctoa*
Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*
Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*
White-cheeked Starling *Sturnus cineraceus*
Jay *Garrulus glandarius (japponicus & brandti)*
Rook *Corvus frugilegus*
Carrion Crow *Corvus corone*
Jungle Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*

Mammals

Largha Seal (Spotted Seal) *Phoca Largha*
Sika Deer *Cervus nippon*