



A [Tropical Birding](#) Custom Tour

## Japan in Winter: Birding on Ice – Custom Tour

28 January - 11 February 2018

TOUR LEADER: ANDRES VASQUEZ

Photos by Andres Vasquez



Top: Steller's Sea-Eagle, left: Blakiston's Fish-Owl, center: Red-crowned Crane, right Japanese Macaque

## INTRODUCTION:

Japan in Winter is a magical place and a tour that every birder MUST do at some point in life. With three of the birding world's Super Stars like the hulking **Steller's Sea-Eagle**, the elegant and iconic **Red-crowned Cranes** (once as little as 16 pairs was all there was for this species), the largest owl in the World **Blakiston's Fish-Owl** posing for pictures, Hokkaido alone among the three islands visited, is a birder's paradise. If you add to this heavyweight trio other localized targets like **Japanese Accentor**, **Japanese Murrelet**, **Saunders's Gull**, **Long-tailed Rosefinch**, **Baikal Teal**, **Asian Rosy-Finch**, **Black-faced Spoonbill**, **Falcated Duck**, **Japanese Waxwing**, and **Japanese Wood-Pigeon**, then this tour is already a birder's, and a lister's dream.



The beautiful Japanese tit, seen on most days of the tour

Further more, if you enjoy waterfowl, the amount of these birds we find in Japan is crazy among which the over-the-top beautiful **Mandarin Duck** takes a high spot on the rankings of the family but other members are also highly appreciated starting with **Long-tailed Ducks**, **Halequin Ducks**, **Common Goldeneyes**, **Tufted Ducks**, **Great Scaup**, **White-winged and Black Scoters**, two species of swan, two mergansers, **Smew**, **Common Pochard**, among others. If you still require another excuse, Japan holds one of the greatest spectacles of birding which takes place every morning during winter: the feeding of over **13,000 individual cranes** of four different species, **Hooded**, **White-naped**, **Sandhill**, and **Common**; this is a mesmerizing show that combines sunrise light with a cacophony of calls of thousands of birds flying in from all directions to feed on the open grasslands of Izumi.



Putting birds aside, other aspects of nature that we enjoy on this tour are enough to bring thousands of tourists to Japan. Among those things we can mention the visit to Jigokudani Park, where the Japanese Macaques (aka **Snow Monkeys**) visit the hot springs of an idyllic snow-filled mountain valley creating a show that brings hundreds of visitors to the spot every day. We also enjoyed very much seeing a family of cute **Red Foxes** playing in the snow fields of Furen Lake. Birding and nature sightseeing took place among breathtaking landscapes, adorned with snowcapped volcanos, lush evergreen forests, or across endless fields of white snow. All this makes that every day, even the ones in which we mainly need to move from one birding area to another, still very enjoyable and soul comforting.



Japanese Macaques enjoying a hot tub in Jigokudani Park

This year we ran two tours parallel to each other at the same time, one the normal set departure tour (guided by Charley Hesse and detailed in a different trip report) and the other, a custom tour for a very nice couple of birders Patricia and Michael, that wanted to do it at their own pace. This turned out very productive for both groups since we managed to cover more land as a team and kept in constant communication with updates about the birds found at the different spots we both visited independently. There were a couple of activities that we did all together like the boat rides in Hokaido and Kyushu plus the last day of the tour's activities since it required last minute planning due to a surprising and frustrating cancellation of the ferry that was going to take us to Miyake Island due to bad weather conditions, but about this we could not do anything more than coming up with a back up plan that turned out well for all concerned.



## DAILY NARRATIVE:

**Jan 28 - Tokyo to Karuizawa:** After spending the previous night in Narita area near the international airport, I went to pick the two participants of this custom tour, Patricia and Michael, in downtown Tokyo where they had been staying for a few nights while doing some pre-tour sightseeing. At about 8h30am we were on our way driving north towards Akigase Park on the outskirts of the huge metropolis. Not too long after, we found ourselves in a more calmed place surrounded by trees and open areas away from the stressful traffic and fast pace of the capital.



Japanese Accentor near the feeders of our hotel in Karuizawa

We started the trip list with a quick succession of birds, beginning with the most common of the local birds like **White-cheeked Starlings**, **Oriental Turtle-Dove**, **Black-faced Bunting** and **Large-billed Crows**, followed by various **Hawfinches**, **Brown-headed Thrush**, **Japanese Tit**, the first of many **Oriental Greenfinches**, and then a couple surprises for the tour, an active and tame **Eurasian Wryneck** that was foraging on the ground near a river and a skulking **Chinese Hwamei** that we saw flying into some thick vegetation and managed good views with some patience.

The river held **Common Pochard**, **Tufted Duck**, **Green-winged (Eurasian) Teal**, **Little Grebe**, and **Eurasian Coot**. We then found a couple other buntings, **Meadow and Rustic Buntings**, both so elegant and striking that were placed among the favorites of the morning.



We only had about an hour to bird in this location since we had still some longish distance to drive toward Karuizawa where we spent the next couple of nights. I wanted to get there with time to visit already the forest just north of the town where several special birds are found. We had a quick lunch on the way, and soon found ourselves surrounded by absolutely breathtaking landscapes dominated by the astonishing snowcapped Asama Volcano (Asama-yama) and hilly pine forest on the slopes. Arriving into town at about two, we had time to check into our hotel and check on the feeders by the lobby which were active with **Japanese** and **Varied Tits**, **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, **Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker** and the star of the afternoon, the cryptic and normally difficult **Japanese Accentor**.

We then took a drive and short walk along a protected area called Wild Bird Forest reserve where we saw a **Meadow Bunting**, a surprising **Goldcrest**, **Eurasian Nuthatch**, the first female **Daurian Redstart**, a flight view of **Brown Dipper** and an even shorter sighting of **Japanese Green Woodpecker** but we did have, on the other hand, great scope views of **Japanese Waxwings** that were foraging in the canopy of the forest. We then called it a day and headed back to the hotel for an 11-course Japanese style dinner that was quite a cultural experience.



Varied Tits are common on every forested area of Honshu

**Jan 29 - Karuizawa and Saku:** We had a pre-breakfast walk along the forest in search of a Copper Pheasant which sadly was not going to show up after various attempts in the next 36 hours. On the other hand, we did see **Great Spotted** and **Japanese Green Woodpeckers**, **Japanese Grosbeak**, **Eurasian Jay**, **Brown Dipper**, **Red-flanked Bluetail**, **Daurian Redstart**, **Dusky Thrushes**, **Coal Tit** and a few of the common species of the area. After a quite typical Japanese



breakfast (including cold eggs, salad, fish, miso soup, rice, green tea, etc) we headed back to the forest in search of the pheasant but after another unfruitful attempt, we decided to move on and visit a reservoir near the town of Saku.

The waters were half frozen but the birds felt comfortable sitting and lying on the ice beaches formed on one side of the lake. We got various species there, **Common Pochard, Mallard, Northern Pintails, Eastern Spot-billed Duck, Eurasian Wigeon**, a few **Gray Herons** and some **Black-eared Kites** flying close by.



A Ring-necked (Japanese Green) Pheasant runs across the dry fields near Saku

The Chikuma River flows right next to the dam and it held a couple other species we did not see on this artificial lake. This included three species of wagtail, **Gray, White** and **Japanese Wagtails**, **Eurasian Coot, Little Grebe, Common Merganser**, and two of the targets of my clients: **Smew** and **Long-billed Plover**. We headed towards lunch and had a modern Japanese experience by eating in one of the popular rotatory-belt Sushi Bars where you are welcomed by a touchscreen robot that will ask you how many are in your party and after you order your special rolls on the screen.

After this enjoyable experience, we started driving back towards Karuizawa and on the way got a male **Ring-necked (Japanese Green) Pheasant** in gorgeous light running across an open field. A few kilometers further north, Patricia spotted **Azure-winged Magpies** so a sudden stop in a rural neighborhood was made to enjoy these scarce birds. We then visited again the forested road to look for the Copper Pheasant with no luck again, but we got better views of the dipper and a few other common birds.





**Eurasian Nuthatch above and Meadow Bunting below**





**Jan 30 - Karuizawa to Komatsu:** A very special day was to come today as we would visit a World famous site, Jigokudani Park or westernized as Snow Mokey Park; this site is about an hour away from Karuizawa. Upon arrival we changed into our heavier snow gear that included crampons for our shoes and did the one mile-long walk inside this protected park. This walk is magical even when we did not see much at all in terms of birds but the forest surrounding the trail is extremely beautiful so you want to take pictures around every corner.



Japanese Macaques gave us a great show near Nagano

The trail takes you to this small hot spring pool where a troop of **Japanese Macaques** learned from humans, around the second half of the past century, the rewards of a hot tub so they take turns and have a soak in the steamy water surrounded by snowy mountains. This whole setting is just so picturesque that you could easily spend hours taking pictures of the funny monkeys. A few were inside the pool but most remained foraging nearby, many others decided to just hold tight on to the warm pipes that get the hot water to another site lower down the valley. We spent there a bit more than an hour and then we moved on since we had a long ride that afternoon through one of the highways that normally receives lots of snow and rain during this time of the year; we did not want to do this in the dark.





Some more shots of Japanese Macaques in and out of the water. Their faces turn brighter red due to the hot tub.





**Jan 31 – Komatsu, Kaga and Sakai plus Katano Kamo-ike Reserve:** The weather was difficult today, heavy snow accompanied us throughout the morning and it had been like that from a couple days ago. This meant that the fields we were going to scan for some birds were all covered in snow, specially the one for Greater White-fronted Geese but we still decided to go give it a try just in case. Even though those turned out unproductive as expected, on the way we did find a family of **Gray-headed Lapwings** and a few **Common Snipe** that were enduring the harsh conditions as they found an open field with a bit of water still not frozen. We then moved to a small pond in the outskirts of Sakai where we saw the first of **Falcated Ducks** of the tour together with other species we had seen before including **Smew** and **Northern Shoveler**. A surprise from the spot was a lone **Hooded Crane** that flew in and started foraging along the snow covered fields.



Gray-headed Lapwings still endured the sub-zero temperatures near Komatsu

I decided to still see if we would get something near the coast but just when we got there, and after seeing our first **Great Cormorants**, the snow started to come down really heavily and the visibility was so poor that even driving was challenging near that area. We decided to just head towards Katano Kamo-ike, a Nature Visitor Center that faces a beautiful lake full of waterfowl where from the comfort and warmth of the nice building we could set our scope and scan around. We were lucky that the **Greater White-fronted Geese** that we could not find earlier were present here like only few times they do. We also got there our first **Tundra (Bewick's) Swans**, **Taiga Bean-Geese**, and the main target for the location, the beautiful **Baikal Teal** which was present in good numbers, mainly far out but a few moved in closer and we got great scope views.



After a prolonged sit down lunch at a restaurant and seeing that the snow was just not giving us a break coming down hard, we planned on moving back towards the hotel but when we arrived and got into our rooms we only had a little time to use bathrooms since unexpectedly the weather switched, clear skies opened in between the clouds and the snow stopped. We could not just stay in, so we took our bins and headed out again. Scanning the mouth of a river near our hotel we got **Merlin, Japanese Cormorant, Mew (Kamchatka)** and **Herring (Vega) Gulls, Red-breasted Merganser**, and a few other waterfowl. We then drove down to Lake Shibayama in Kaga and got the first of many **Common Goldeneye**, plus **Great Crested Grebe**, and various more **Falcated Ducks**.



Common Goldeneyes in Hokkaido

**Feb 1 – Komatsu (Honshu) to Kushiro (Hokkaido):** This was mainly a travel day, with an early flight to Tokyo (Haneda) to connect with our flight to the northern island of Hokkaido. Flights were on time, and everything ran smoothly. We arrived into Kushiro, the easternmost commercial airport in the south of the island and started driving to the south end of Lake Furen where our lodge was located. On the way, we already got the first flight views of **White-tailed Eagle** and **Steller's Sea-Eagle, Rough-legged Hawk** and many **Black (-eared) Kite**.

**Feb 2 – The Nosappu Peninsula:** We started the day with a short pre-breakfast ride through a forest patch near the hotel where we saw **Marsh Tit, Great Spotted Woodpecker**, a second **Goldcrest**, and a couple of other passerines. We heard a Northern Raven but could not locate it. A family of **Red Foxes** gave us a show just outside our lodge just before we needed to drive towards the south coast to take a boat ride from the port of Ochiishi. The two and a half hour boat

ride was a little hard since the waves were about two meter high, quite choppy. It was a bit challenging at the beginning given the cold conditions, and the constant swaying of the boat, but we got good birds like **Black-throated Loon**, **Long-tailed** and **Harlequin Ducks**, many **Black Scoters** but only one **White-winged Scoter**, many **Pelagic Cormorants**, **Pigeon** and **Spectacled Guillemots**, and some **Red-breasted Mergansers**.



Some Harlequin Ducks were quite approachable in the harbours of some small towns in Nosappu

We then birded the whole coastal line until the very tip of the peninsula stopping at various harbors to scan around. We added to the list **Red-necked Grebe**, **Slaty-backed**, **Glaucous** and **Glaucous-winged Gulls**, a distant **Ancient Murrelet**, and a single **Red-faced Cormorant** among the many **Pelagic Cormorants** we saw. While scanning, we also found **Harbor Seal** and **Spotted Seal**. On the way back to the lodge we found a **Red-crowned Crane** right at the edge of the highway on a semi-frozen lake, so we stopped the car for nice close-up views but the light was already almost gone and it was only about 4h40pm so no pictures achieved just yet.

**Feb 3 – The Notsuke Peninsula and Rausu:** The weather was superb all morning with blue skies and temperatures relatively good (only as low as -5°C/23°F). With not much to go for in the morning in the Furen area, we decided to check for some old known roosting spots for Ural Owl so we drove up north for a couple of hours. Sadly, the quest did not produce the desired results but it was only a long shot. We then moved towards the Notsuke Peninsula where we looked for some buntings that again did not cooperate. We did get a couple new trip birds in the forms of **Eurasian Kestrel** and **Red-throated Loon**.





Long-tailed Ducks were sometimes quite close to us in Nosappu and Red Foxes contrasted well with the snow of Hokkaido





Since the weather up ahead on the way to our final destination for the day looked quite bad, we agreed on starting our drive towards Rausu and just bird near the hotel the rest of the day to avoid driving in poor visibility. Just above the small town of Rausu, we found a couple of passerines, **Eurasian Nuthatch** of the *S. asiatica* subspecies which differs from the rest of Japan in it being quite paler. We also found one individual **Eurasian Jay** (subspecies *G. bambergi*), which has a distinctive orange head.

The time had come to check into our lodge for the night, the famous Washi-no-Yado, where we were hoping to find one of the most wanted birds in the World, the gigantic **Blakiston's Fish-Owl**, and the biggest owl on the planet. The owners of the place have managed to create a great feeding station for this bird with some fish set right in a spot illuminated with some fast-pulse lights. This is great not only for seeing the owl amazingly without disturbing it with flashlights but also is unmatched for photography thanks to those lights. It is still quite challenging since you have to have a camera that manages high ISOs but once you get the settings correctly as advised by the owners of the lodge, you can get some good pics.



The much desired Blakiston's Fish-Owl came to eat fish at the feeding station of or hotel in Rausu

The previous time (two years ago) we had visited this lodge, the owl did not show up but until 11pm. Considering that it gets dark at 4h30pm in this part of Japan during the winter and that the bird can show up any time from dusk on, waiting until close to midnight is a long time. We were prepared for an extended vigil since upon arrival the lady that runs the lodge told us the bird was not coming until past midnight. The lodge serves dinner quite early, 5pm, so that you



are ready for the bird when it shows. During dinner one of the waitresses said she had just heard the owl and a couple minutes later, the bird caught us all by surprise when at 5h43pm it flew on to a branch of the tree overlooking the water and just a couple minutes later it went down for some fish. This took about 10 minutes in total until it left but those were 10 minutes of panic at the beginning, rushing for cameras, trying to get an angle to see it among all the birders and photographers; once everybody got great views the calm settled back in the room and the happiness produced high-fiving here and there.

For the ones, like me, that did not bring a camera for dinner, extra waiting was needed to see if the owl came back and it did but it never landed again in the sweet spot so photos were still not obtained. The bird showed up at 5h43pm, 7h30pm, 10h45pm and 11h30pm when I decided to go to bed without a single shot. I was happy just with seeing the bird anyways.

**Feb 4 – Rausu area:** This was probably the most memorable no-lifers day you can ever get on a birding trip. Some context: we had already seen the previous day **Steller's Sea-Eagle** flying over and by night the monstrously big **Blakiston's Fish-Owl** that came into the feeding site on our lodge. So technically we did not get lifers but it was simply an extraordinary day that started with a boat ride off the port of Rausu in search of floating ice rafts where the eagles would normally sit.



The hulking Steller's Sea-Eagle making an entrance on the harbor of Rausu





**A close up shot while sitting on the harbor walls and some flight shots from the boat off of Rausu port**





We had a full day of bad snowy weather today but happily the boat ride to the see and photograph eagles did go out and we were on it. The snow was light at times and that allowed us to get good photos of both **White-tailed Eagle** and **Steller's Sea-Eagle**. The crew on the boat was constantly throwing fish out to the sea and as the eagles rushed to get it from the surface of the water so you would get superb photo opportunities; even with bad conditions at times in terms of visibility, some of the photos came out quite nice.



The beautiful White-tailed Eagle takes second place due to the presence of its bigger and nicer cousin in the same area

Since the snow did not stop, it only got stronger, and without any target bird to look for in the vicinity, we took a well-rested day and remained mainly at the hotel working on pictures, trying to narrow down to a couple hundred the thousand photos we had just shot; we only went out for lunch and reaffirmed the plan on not pushing our luck on the low visibility roads.

We had one more chance for photos of the owl tonight, and so we had an even earlier lunch, 4h45pm, to be prepared for when the bird comes. Once again, the monster owl surprised us and showed up at 5h18pm. I rushed back to my room from where I managed at least a couple decent pictures with which I was satisfied.

**Feb 5 – Rausu to Akan Crane Observation Center:** Still with bad conditions in terms of weather, we could not venture too much to go through narrower roads up the mountains to look for a couple passerines so we decided to just drive to the south of the island and bird the Kirritapu Peninsula in search of **Asian Rosy-Finches** that are regularly seen there. It took us more than a couple of hours to travel down south due to the snowy and icy conditions of the road but



once we got to the area the weather was better and the roads were clear. We birded scanned the sea in search of any rarity that may have shown there but we only found the regular suspects there, which are still great like **Long-tailed** and **Harlequin Ducks**, **Goldeneyes**, **Scoters**, etc.

Then we cruised slowly along the road with no much luck initially on these finches but suddenly a good-size flock of about a hundred birds flew up spooked by a car departing from a house and they all landed on the electricity cables above the house. We got excellent scope views. Afterwards we scanned a little more around some wetlands and got some swans and other waterfowl, the first group of **Dunlin** of the trip, some herons and a couple of the elegant **Meadow Buntings**.



**A pair of Red-crowned Cranes displaying under the snow in Akan**

There was time to drive towards the famous **Red-crowned Crane** feeding areas of Akan and we arrived in perfect time to see over a hundred cranes feeding on the snow fields behind the Crane Observation Center of Akan. The light was at times really nice and at times the snow and the clouds darken the scene but we were happy with some shots we got. We checked into our hotel for the night which is virtually across the road and celebrated a great crane day.

**Feb 6 – Hokkaido to Kyushu:** It was mainly a travel day for us today, but we did have an hour to bird this morning so we decided to head back to the crane center to get the last photos of the cranes and got **Whooper Swans** as a bonus in the same area. Then we flew to the southern island of Kyushu with a brief stop in Tokyo.



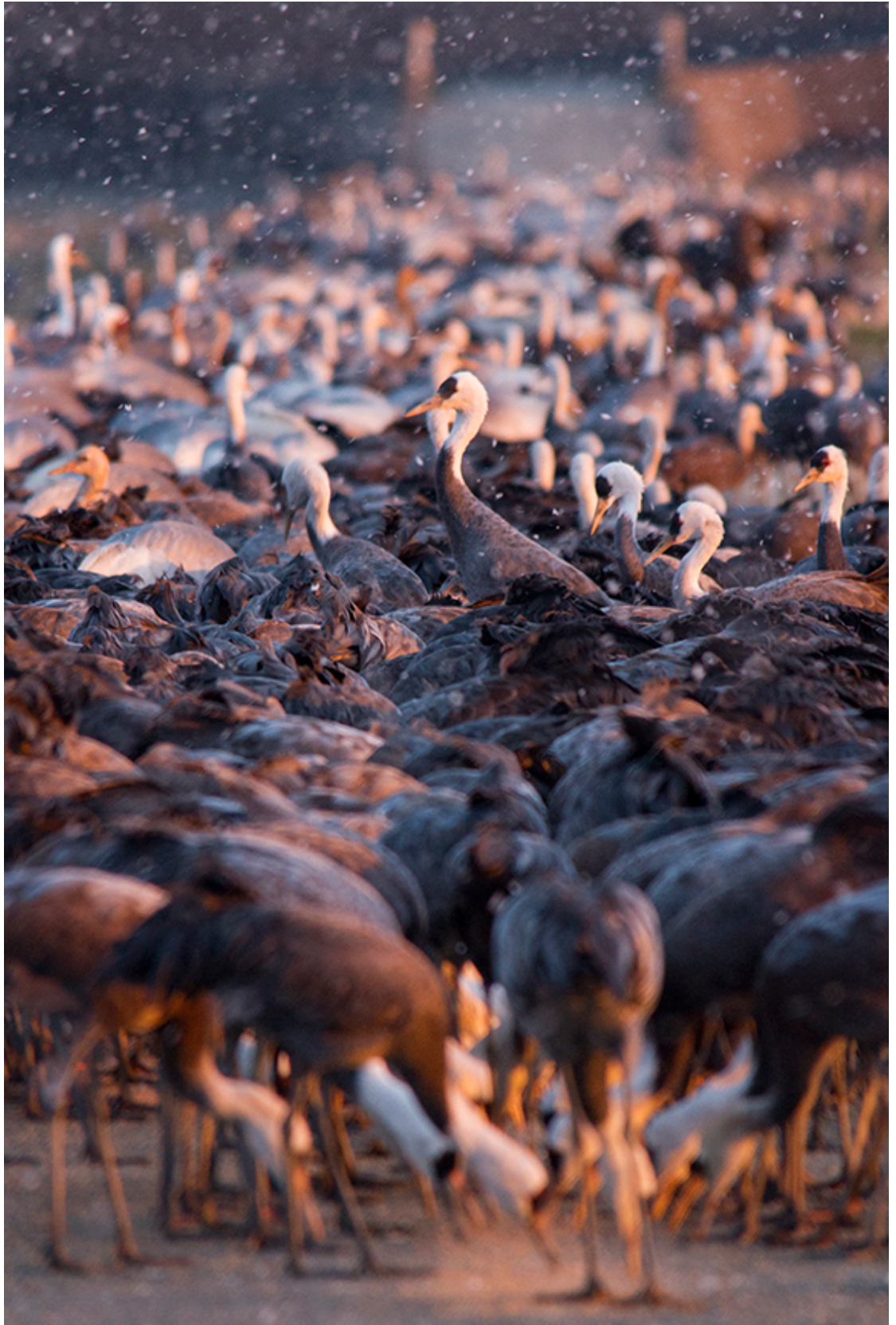


Sometimes single individuals also practice their display skills



Upon arrival, we got our rental car and started the 1h20mins driving to Izumi with a stop half way through on a river called Sendai. Here we found the only hirundids for the trip in the forms of **Barn Swallow** and **Asian House Martin**. We also saw a few of the regular ducks of the region plus **Japanese, Gray** and **White Wagtails**. We did not have a lot of daylight time left so we moved on towards Izumi where we stayed the next two nights.

**Feb 7 – Izumi and Yatsushiro:** We had an early start today as we needed to get to the Izumi crane feeding grounds right at dawn to witness one of the nicest birding spectacles in the World, the arrival of over 13,000 individuals of 4 different species of cranes to the vast open grounds of this southern part of Japan. The almost horizontal pink light, the snowflakes and the large number of cranes created a superb portrait for our pictures. The vast majority were **Hooded Cranes** and the second



most common were **White-naped**; we only saw a couple of each **Common** and **Sandhill Cranes**. We spent almost an hour in the spot witnessing the arrival of the large number of birds and taking the “first light of the morning” pictures.





The beautiful light of dawn created a special moment when a Hooded Crane calls as if protesting someone stepped on its foot



From the same corner of the road, we spotted some great birds as well, a group of three **Tundra Bean-Swans**, a female **Northern Goshawk** tearing apart its prey, two **Greater White-fronted Geese**, a distant **Eurasian Spoonbill** followed by the rare and vulnerable **Black-faced Spoonbill** (photo on right). Afterwards we started driving along the rice fields where we picked up many **Eurasian Skylarks** and **American (Buff-bellied) Pipits** as well as the only **Chestnut-eared Bunting** of the entire trip. In a different location north of the feeding site, on an area with extensive reed beds we found **Chinese Penduline-Tit** and **Common Reed-Buntings** plus a large flock of striking **Bramblings**.

Late in the morning, we decided to start a longish drive towards Yatsushiro to bird the estuary of the Kuma River. When we got there the tide was high already which means the main target of the place was not going to be around; I'm talking about the scarce **Saunders' Gull**. After a quick closer check during which we found a large flock of **Russet Sparrows**, we drove to have a leisured and prolonged lunch to wait for the tide to draw down.



When we headed back to the birding spot in midafternoon, we started seeing some mud flats exposed and they looked promising but the main target never arrived. On the other hand, moving up and down the coast line we picked up the first **Common Kingfisher**, some **Japanese White-eyes**, flocks of **Rook**, **Green** and **Common Sandpipers**, **Kentish** and



**Black-bellied Plovers, Lesser Sand-Plover, Dunlin, Eurasian Curlew, Black-tailed Gull, Common Greenshank, and the surprise of the afternoon, a nice Caspian Tern.**

**Feb 8 – Izumi to Miike:** We had another morning to visit the feeding center and we decided to go back there but not as early since we knew light was not going to be good for photos and in fact it never turned very good due to an overcast sky. We moved around the fields that were so productive for us the previous day and managed to pick up a couple new birds for the trip like **Peregrine Falcon, Hen Harrier**, and a surprising passing **Eastern Yellow Wagtail**. Also we tried without any good results for Ruddy-breasted Crake and Eastern Water Rail but did not hear either of them.

We needed to head east towards the center of the island of Kyushu, and so we started driving through the mountains and stopped a couple of times trying to target a **Crested Kingfisher** which we got after only the second site we visited, after missing it on the Kogawa Dam. We also saw nearby a beautiful male **Blue Rock-Thrush** which felt like a redemption after having only seen a distant female before.



**A male Daurian Redstart in gorgeous light at Miike**

Lunch time found us near Kirishima Shrine so after a nice sit-down lunch in an attractively located restaurant overlooking the mountains; we visited this beautiful shrine before continuing with some birding close to Kirishima. During the afternoon, we birded the lush forest around Miike Lake. Here we found several new birds like **Olive-backed Pipit, Yellow-throated Bunting**, a strangely tame **White's Thrush**, and various **Japanese Minivets** plus a couple of **Black-**



**necked Grebes** on the lake. Other attractive birds on the forest, which we had seen before, included **Long-tailed, Japanese** and **Varied Tits, Daurian Redstarts, Red-flanked Bluetails, and Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker**.

We then headed towards our hotel back near Kirishima where we got delighted with a tremendous dinner, prepared by an internationally prepared Japanese chef, which consisted of over 10 courses of the best quality and unmatched flavor one can taste.

**Feb 9 – Miike Lake and Kadogawa:** Early in the morning we moved back towards the forest of Miike which was much quieter than the previous afternoon. The tranquil **White's Thrush** was still around but the rest of the birds seemed like they had disappeared over night. We walked a little bit the trails in search of White-backed Woodpecker but did not hear a single tap on a tree. We did manage to see the very shy **Gray Bunting** deep inside the forest but the views were not very prolonged given its nature.

We needed to take a boat ride just past noon and we were a couple hours away from that port so the rest of the morning was mainly driving. Since we did great time on the road we had time to take a first try for the scarce **Japanese Wood-Pigeon** in a beautiful forested overlook in Hyuga just south of Kadogawa. At the time we only managed a quick fly view that was far from acceptable but we were going to come back in the afternoon.



Two of the three murrelets we saw that day

After a quick convenience store lunch on the go, we arrived to the dock where our boat awaited. This was going to be a short ride since the one target we had was seen with certain ease thanks to the Captain of the boat who had been looking on his own for the much wanted **Japanese Murrelet** just to stake it out for us. He took us directly to the area where he had seen three birds in the morning and with some detailed scanning we saw the birds nicely and fairly close. This winter had been particularly cold in the area, in fact in most of Japan, and the murrelets had not moved in yet in big numbers from their wintering grounds so very few birds had been seen; in fact, we were apparently the first birding group to see these birds in the year according to the Captain. We were very happy to have seen this one, apparently the rarest and most threatened alcid on earth. On that ride we also added **Pacific Reef Heron** to the list and got much better views of **Japanese Cormorant**.



With unfinished business in Hyuga, we headed back to the overlook trail that leads to the Umagase and after some deep search we managed to see two individuals **Japanese Wood-Pigeon**, one of them nicely in the scope. There were also some **Japanese Minivets** and a few other passerines but given that we still had some daylight ahead of us we decided to go try already for the scarce **Saunders's Gull** near Miyasaki. The tide was perfectly low on the Hitotsuze River estuary, with exposed mud that also hosted some waders like **Eurasian Curlew**, **Kentish Plovers**, **Dunlin**, and **Black-bellied Plover**. Right upon arrival, and after just a little scanning, a full adult winter plumage gull flew in front of our bins and we got great views; in total we saw 3 individuals of this nowadays considered Vulnerable but previously Endangered bird.



Japanese Minivets are a bit dull compared to most of the other Asian minivets but they are still great birds

**Feb 10 – Miyasaki area and surroundings:** A rainy day was ahead of us according to the forecast today, and sadly it turned out as a correct prediction. On the bright side, we had seen basically all of the targets for the area so we decided to visit a small lake towards the west of town that was wonderful for waterfowl. We saw at much closer range **Baikal Teal** and **Mandarin Ducks**, both in good numbers and in good light. There were also **Wigeons**, **Shovelers**, **Common Pochards**, **Eurasian Coots**, **Tufted Ducks**, and a couple other species. The forest surrounding the lake was adorned with a group of about 20 **Japanese Grosebeaks** sitting patiently atop of the trees.

Rain just started then, and we tried to find a couple other songbirds in the area and were rewarded with second views of **Yellow-throated Buntings** but since it was starting to come harder we moved on further inland towards the upper portions of the Oyodo River where we birded for about an hour. From the bridge above a minor tributary of the river we



saw again a **Crested Kingfisher** flying by twice. There were several other birds in the area like **Black-faced and Meadow Buntings**, **Eastern Buzzard**, **Barn Swallows**, etc.

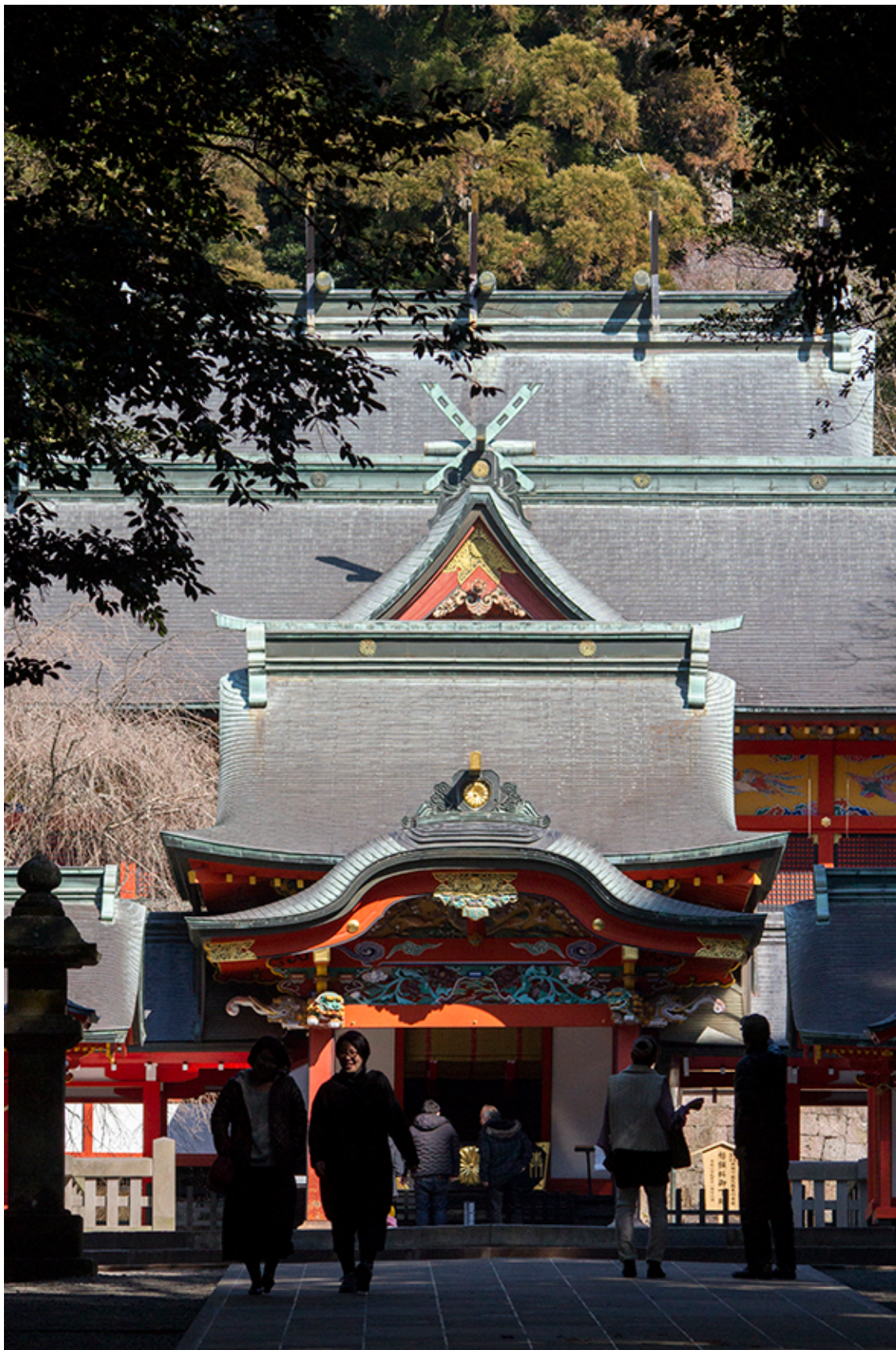
The rain was a bit too strong at the time to do some proper birding so we decided to just start heading back towards Miyasaki and went for lunch on another rotating-belt touch-screen-ordering Sushi Bar that was a big hit before. After a relaxed, fun, and delicious lunch and with rains still pouring we tried to bird a little more near Miyasaki but it was impossible and the rains did not stop. We decided to just head towards the airport and wait there for our flight back to Haneda.



Lunch in this type of sushi bars was a great hit, everybody loves it.

The scheduled plan was to land by night in Tokyo, take a train to the Takeshiba Ferry Terminal where we were going to take the overnight ferry towards Miyake Island in search of the endemic species located on the island that include Izu Thrush and Owston's Tit for instance. When we were already sitting on the plane, I received a call from our ground agent in Tokyo saying that due to bad weather conditions the ferry was cancelled. This was a sad change on the itinerary and a major disappointment because not only we had lost the chance for the island endemics but also the pelagic birding on the way back where Short-tailed Albatross for instance is regular. We could not do much about this, but logistic arrangements needed to be done on the spot. Once in Tokyo's airport, we managed get a car from a rental company which was not easy since it was a long holiday in Japan and most cars were taken already. This was also an issue when trying to find a hotel for the night as most accommodation was booked out. After quite a bit of online searching we found a place and drove towards there, arriving at close to 10pm.





Elegantly ornate, the Kirishima Shrine is worth the visit



**Feb 11 – Akigase and Yakushiike Parks:** With not many new birds for us to find around the Tokyo metropolitan areas, we found online some reports of a couple birds that would be new for the list and decided to target those.

First we visited again the birdy Akigase Park just north of Tokyo on the Saitama prefecture where we had missed before the desired **Long-tailed Rosefinch**. This time we got it with no problems at all, in three different spots in the park. Of course, the conditions were much more favorable today compared to the snow covered circumstances of the first visit. We also added to the list the widespread **Black-headed Gull** which we weirdly had not seen until then. Other worth mentioning species included **Hawfinch**, **Brown-headed Thrush**, **Eurasian Wryneck**, **Smew**, and **Peregrine Falcon**.



A pair of the gorgeous Long-tailed Rosefinch feeding in a tree

Afterwards, we moved towards another park this time just west of Tokyo trying to twitch a Ferruginous Duck that had been reported a couple days back. After a pizza lunch on the go, we arrived to the park but the rare duck was nowhere to be found. The consolation prize was a family of **Tufted Ducks** which despite being far from rare in the Old World, the proximity that these individuals allowed us was a nice reward anyways. We then headed back to central Tokyo and said good bye after two weeks of incredible experiences, great birds and breathtaking landscapes.



**FINAL CHECKLIST:**

During the trip we recorded a total of **166** species of which 2 species were heard only (**H**) and only 1 was seen exclusively by the tour leader (**L**). It is worth considering that the extension did not run due to the ferry cancellation which would have given us at least some extra 8 to 10 species. Other abbreviation used as follows: E - Endemic species, EAE - East Asian Endemic, NEAE - North-east Asian Endemic, NE - Near Endemic species, BE - Breeding Endemic, Essp - Endemic subspecies, I - Introduced species; Conservation status: EN – Endangered, VU – Vulnerable, NT - Near-threatened. The final checklist is detailed below.

**ANSERIFORMES: Anatidae**

Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons</i>	
Taiga Bean-Goose	<i>Anser fabalis</i>	
Tundra Bean-Goose	<i>Anser serrirostris</i>	
Tundra (Bewick's) Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus bewickii</i>	
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	
Common (Eurasian) Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>	
Mandarin Duck	<i>Aix galericulata</i>	EAE
Baikal Teal	<i>Sibirionetta formosa</i>	
Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	
Falcated Duck	<i>Anas falcata</i>	NT
Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>	
American Wigeon	<i>Anas americana</i>	
Eastern Spot-billed Duck	<i>Anas zonorhyncha</i>	
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	
Green-winged (Eurasian) Teal	<i>Anas c. crecca</i>	
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	VU
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>	
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	
White-winged Scoter	<i>Melanitta fusca</i>	
Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</i>	NT
Long-tailed Duck	<i>Clangula hyemalis</i>	VU
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>	
Smew	<i>Mergellus albellus</i>	
Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>	
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>	

**GALLIFORMES: Phasianidae**

Ring-necked (Green) Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus tanensis</i>	Essp
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**GAVIIFORMES: Gaviidae**

Red-throated Loon (Diver)	<i>Gavia stellata</i>	
Arctic Loon (Black-throated Diver)	<i>Gavia arctica</i>	



**PODICIPEDIFORMES: Podicipedidae**

Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena</i>
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Eared (Black-necked) Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>

**SULIFORMES: Phalacrocoracidae**

Red-faced Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax urile</i>
Pelagic Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Japanese (Temminck's) Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax capillatus</i>

**PELECANIFORMES: Ardeidae**

Gray Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Pacific Reef-Heron	<i>Egretta sacra</i>
Black-crowned Night-Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>

**PELECANIFORMES: Threskiornithidae**

Eurasian Spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	
Black-faced Spoonbill	<i>Platalea minor</i>	EN EABE

**ACCIPITRIFORMES: Pandionidae**

Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>
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**ACCIPITRIFORMES: Accipitridae**

Hen Harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	
Black(-eared) Kite	<i>Milvus migrans lineatus</i>	
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	
Steller's Sea-Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus pelagicus</i>	VU EAE
Rough-legged Hawk (Buzzard)	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>	
Eastern Buzzard	<i>Buteo j. japonicus/toyoshimai</i>	

**GRUIFORMES: Rallidae**

Eurasian Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>

**GRUIFORMES: Gruidae**

Sandhill Crane	<i>Antigone canadensis</i>	
White-naped Crane	<i>Antigone vipio</i>	VU
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	
Hooded Crane	<i>Grus monacha</i>	VU
Red-crowned (Japanese) Crane	<i>Grus japonensis</i>	EN EAE

**CHARADRIIFORMES: Charadriidae**

Black-bellied (Grey) Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	NT
Gray-headed Lapwing	<i>Vanellus cinereus</i>	
Lesser Sand-Plover	<i>Charadrius mongolus</i>	



Kentish Plover	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>	
Long-billed Plover	<i>Charadrius placidus</i>	
<b>CHARADRIIFORMES: Scolopacidae</b>		
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	
Dunlin	<i>Calidris alpina</i>	
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	
<b>CHARADRIIFORMES: Alcidae</b>		
Pigeon Guillemot	<i>Cephus columba</i>	
Spectacled Guillemot	<i>Cephus carbo</i>	
Ancient Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus antiquus</i>	
Japanese Murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus wumizusume</i>	VU
<b>CHARADRIIFORMES: Laridae</b>		
Saunders's Gull	<i>Saundersilarus saundersi</i>	VU
(Common) Black-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	
Black-tailed Gull	<i>Larus crassirostris</i>	
Mew (Kamchatka) Gull	<i>Larus canus kamtschatschensis</i>	
Herring (Vega) Gull	<i>Larus v. vegae/mongolicus</i>	
Slaty-backed Gull	<i>Larus schistisagus</i>	EAE
Glaucous-winged Gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>	
Glaucous Gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>	
Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>	
<b>COLUMBIFORMES: Columbidae</b>		
Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	I
Japanese Wood-Pigeon	<i>Columba janthina</i>	NT NEAE
Oriental Turtle-Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>	
<b>STRIGIFORMES: Strigidae</b>		
Blakiston's Fish-Owl	<i>Ketupa blakistoni</i>	EN NEAE
<b>CORACIIFORMES: Alcedinidae</b>		
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	
Crested Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle lugubris</i>	Essp
<b>PICIFORMES: Picidae</b>		
Eurasian Wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>	
(Japanese) Pygmy Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos kizuki</i>	
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	
Japanese (Green) Woodpecker	<i>Picus awokera</i>	E
<b>FALCONIFORMES: Falconidae</b>		
Eurasian Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	
Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>	
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	
<b>PASSERIFORMES: Campephagidae</b>		
Ryukyu Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus tegimae</i>	E



<b>PASSERIFORMES: Laniidae</b>		
	Bull-headed Shrike	<i>Lanius bucephalus</i>
<b>PASSERIFORMES: Corvidae</b>		
	Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius japonicus</i> Essp
	Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyanus japonica</i> Essp
L	Daurian Jackdaw	<i>Corvus dauuricus</i>
	Rook	<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
	Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>
H	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
<b>PASSERIFORMES: Alaudidae</b>		
	Eurasian (Japanese) Skylark	<i>Alauda arvensis japonica</i> Essp
<b>PASSERIFORMES: Hirundinidae</b>		
	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
	Asian House-Martin	<i>Delichon dasypus</i> Essp
<b>PASSERIFORMES: Paridae</b>		
	Coal Tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>
	Varied Tit	<i>Sittiparus varius</i>
	Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris hensoni</i> Essp
	Willow Tit	<i>Poecile montanus restrictus</i> Essp
	Japanese (Great) Tit	<i>Parus minor</i>
<b>PASSERIFORMES: Remizidae</b>		
	Chinese Penduline-Tit	<i>Remiz consobrinus</i>
	Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus trivirgatus</i> Essp
	Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea roseillia</i> Essp
<b>PASSERIFORMES: Troglodytidae</b>		
	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
<b>PASSERIFORMES: Cinclidae</b>		
	Brown Dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>
<b>PASSERIFORMES: Pycnonotidae</b>		
	Brown-eared Bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes amaurotis</i>
<b>PASSERIFORMES: Regulidae</b>		
	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>
<b>PASSERIFORMES: Scotocercidae</b>		
	Japanese Bush-Warbler	<i>Horornis diphone</i>
<b>PASSERIFORMES: Zosteropidae</b>		
	Japanese White-eye	<i>Zosterops j. japonicus</i> Essp
<b>PASSERIFORMES: Leiothrichidae</b>		
	Chinese Hwamei	<i>Garrulax canorus</i> I
H	Red-billed Leiothrix	<i>Leiothrix lutea</i> I
<b>PASSERIFORMES: Muscicapidae</b>		
	Red-flanked Bluetail	<i>Tarsiger cyanurus</i>
	Daurian Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus aureus</i>
	Blue Rock-Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>

**PASSERIFORMES: Turdidae**

White's Thrush	<i>Zoothera aurea</i>	
Pale Thrush	<i>Turdus pallidus</i>	
Brown-headed Thrush	<i>Turdus chrysolaus</i>	
Dusky Thrush	<i>Turdus eunomus</i>	

**PASSERIFORMES: Sturnidae**

European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>	I
White-cheeked Starling	<i>Spodiopsar cineraceus</i>	

**PASSERIFORMES: Prunellidae**

Japanese Accentor	<i>Prunella rubida fervida</i>	NE
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**PASSERIFORMES: Motacillidae**

Eastern Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla tschutschensis</i>	
Gray Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	
Japanese Wagtail	<i>Motacilla grandis</i>	BE
Olive-backed Pipit	<i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>	
American (Buff-bellied) Pipit	<i>Anthus rubescens japonicus</i>	

**PASSERIFORMES: Bombycillidae**

Japanese Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla japonica</i>	NT
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**PASSERIFORMES: Emberizidae**

Meadow Bunting	<i>Emberiza cioides ciopsis</i>	Essp
Chestnut-eared Bunting	<i>Emberiza fucata</i>	
Rustic Bunting	<i>Emberiza rustica</i>	VU
Yellow-throated Bunting	<i>Emberiza elegans</i>	
Black-faced Bunting	<i>Emberiza spodocephala</i>	
Gray Bunting	<i>Emberiza variabilis</i>	EAE
(Common) Reed Bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	

**PASSERIFORMES: Fringillidae**

Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	
Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>	
Japanese Grosbeak	<i>Eophona personata</i>	
Long-tailed Rosefinch	<i>Uragus sibiricus</i>	
Asian Rosy-Finch	<i>Leucosticte arctoa</i>	
Oriental (Grey-capped) Greenfinch	<i>Chloris sinica</i>	

**PASSERIFORMES: Passeridae**

Russet Sparrow	<i>Passer rutilans</i>	
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	



**MAMMALS****CERCOPITHECIDAE: Old World****Monkeys**

Japanese Macaque	<i>Macaca fuscata</i>	E
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**SCIURIDAE: Squirrels**

Japanese Squirrel	<i>Sciurus lis</i>	E
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**CANIDAE: Canids**

Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	
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**PHOCIDAE: Seals**

Largha (Spotted) Seal	<i>Phoca largha</i>	
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Harbour (Common) Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	
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**CERVIDAE: Deer**

Sika Deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>	Essp
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