

# **JAPAN IN WINTER**

**JANUARY 10 – 22, 2015**

**LEADERS: BOB SUNDSTROM & KAZ SHINODA  
KOJI NIIYA ON HOKKAIDO**

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**By Bob Sundstrom**

The Japan in Winter tour is described as a “crane and sea eagle spectacle,” a billing it more than lives up to. The tour has been designed by Japanese birding tour leader, Kaz Shinoda, and traverses the three main—and distinctively different— islands of Honshu, Kyushu, and Hokkaido, with about a third of the tour devoted to each island. From south to north that’s a span of over 1,600 miles, from the mild weather and green tea plantations of Kyushu to the snowy rim of the Sea of Okhotsk on Hokkaido, the main island of Honshu in between.

On our 2015 tour we enjoyed great views of five species of cranes. At Arasaki on the island of Kyushu, we took in one of the grandest crane spectacles in the world: more than 13,000 White-naped and Hooded cranes congregating in fields and paddies. Tall, silvery White-naped Cranes with bold red faces standing head and shoulders above petite, elegant Hooded Cranes with charcoal bodies, white necks, and red forecrowns. Tucked among their thousands were a handful of Eurasian/Common Cranes and Sandhill Cranes. At sunset, the entire aggregation flew by, a few hundred at a time with the setting sun behind them, to a nighttime roost nearby. A magnificent sight.

We had to wait until the final three days of the tour for our fifth species of crane, the Red-crowned Crane, sometimes called Japanese Crane and the crane that is a cultural icon in Japan. Our first views of Red-crowned Cranes were at sunrise, as a flock of hundreds stood in the icy shallows of a river, the rose-colored sunrise streaming through the bare trees along the stream. Later that day we watched hundreds of Red-crowned Cranes at close range, pairs bugling in unison and performing courtship dances, leaping from the ground with wings arched above them. Unforgettable.

The northern island of Hokkaido was also the winter home of legions of sea-eagles. As we drove the eastern coast of the island and then out the Notsuke Peninsula, massive Steller’s Sea-Eagles with enormous orange bills and white shoulders decorated the landscape: atop utility poles, on the rocky buttress of the shoreline, standing on snow- and ice-covered ponds. Nearby too were White-tailed Sea-Eagles, large eagles the size of Bald Eagles, but still a head shorter than Steller’s.

Hokkaido is also home to another enormous raptor, the world’s largest owl—Blakiston’s Fish-Owl. We had barely arrived at our inn in Yoroushi when one of the staff announced, “The owl is here!” Rushing off the bus, we headed toward a wall of windows that overlook a rushing stream behind the inn. We arrived just in time to find out the owl had just left. But our disappointment didn’t last long. As we came back into the lobby with our bags a few minutes later, the owl—this time two owls!—had returned to hunt fish at the edge of the stream. Huge, tawny owls with floppy crests, a female (the larger of the sexes) can stand 28” tall and with their massive girth weigh nearly 10 pounds, two-and-a-half times the mass of a female Great Horned Owl. For at

least 20 minutes we watched and photographed the owls before adjourning to our lovely rooms, warming Japanese onsen (hot bath), and a superb traditional Japanese dinner.

At Hokkaido's Lake Kussharo we walked a snowy path to the edge of the huge lake, where dozens of Whooper Swans swam in the shallows, enveloped in mist created by geothermal heating of the lake water. Suddenly our attention was called to birds in the trees nearby. First a large woodpecker, the size of a flicker, foraging at the base of a nearby tree. It was a White-backed Woodpecker, the first of the tour and a bird we had been hoping for. This was a male with red washed belly and all red crown. As the woodpecker flew to another tree, attention turned to a couple of Eurasian Treecreepers, also the first of the trip, much like a pale version of North America's Brown Creeper. The treecreepers were part of a loosely organized mixed flock, including Coal Tit, Great Tit, Varied Tit, and Eurasian Nuthatch—all lit up by the sun's reflection off the snow-covered ground. And now it was time to enter the Ainu-themed restaurant just beyond the trees, where we had a superb lunch in a large space decorated with colorful Ainu (Japan's original native people) art motifs.

While the cranes, sea-eagles, and Blakiston's Fish-Owl are the tour headliners, there is a great deal more to see on our Japan in Winter tour: 155 bird species more or less, grand scenery from the Japanese Alps to the rugged seacoast to the green interior, wonderful food, traveling in the comfort of small buses, and a variety of Western style and a couple of traditional Japanese inns. In 2015 we enjoyed 26 species of waterfowl, from Whooper Swans and both Taiga and Tundra bean-geese to superb views of some of the world's fanciest ducks: Mandarin Duck, Baikal Teal, Smew, and Falcated Duck. We watched endemic Japanese Wagtails forage along shallow, gravel-lined streams, alongside Long-billed Plovers, often with White and Gray wagtails nearby. In a forested park on Kyushu, we lucked into a rare Forest Wagtail—for the second straight year on the tour, and a bird Kaz originally discovered there in fall 2013. My personal favorites for the tour included such northern finches as Japanese Grosbeak, Eurasian Bullfinch, Hawfinch, and Long-tailed Rosefinch. We watched three Brown Dippers chase up and down a stream just before a pair of massive, zebra-striped Crested Kingfishers buzzed over our heads.

Beautiful Azure-winged Magpies and Eurasian Jays competed for the title of loveliest corvid of the trip, although Large-billed Crows had the most comical voices. A two-hour boat trip from the eastern tip of Hokkaido took us to nice views of Spectacled Guillemots (a regional specialty), Ancient Murrelets, and Least Auklets. On the island of Kyushu, we found wintering global rarities—Black-faced Spoonbills and Saunders's Gulls. There were dashing Red-flanked Bluetails and Daurian Redstarts along forest paths, some so confiding they landed almost at our feet. The chickadee clan was also well-represented: colorful, multihued Varied Tits, as well as Marsh, Willow, Japanese, and Coal tits. There were also Long-tailed Tits: imagine a Bushtit painted pink, white, and black. Kinglet-sized Chinese Penduline-Tits worked tall streamside reed beds. And throughout the trip a lineup of some of the northern world's finest buntings: Elegant, Meadow, Reed, Chestnut-eared, Gray, Rustic, and Black-faced.

I'm already eager for a return to Japan to see what our 2016 Japan in Winter tour will deliver.

**Days 1-2** Travel to Tokyo area.

**Day 2** Sunday, January 11: *Optional pre-trip outing with Kaz for early arrivals.* Some of the group birded informally on hotel grounds and vicinity early morning. Departed from Narita View Hotel mid-morning to several birding spots in the Narita vicinity: 1) Edosaki town reclaimed area for Taiga Bean Geese; 2) swan sanctuary in Motono Village in Chiba Prefecture; 3) rice fields and brush lines, and adjacent reservoir at Inbanuma in Chiba Prefecture. Excellent day for swans, ducks, and buntings. Night at Narita View Hotel, Narita.

**Day 3** Monday, January 12: Departed Narita View Hotel toward birding sites on the east coast of the main island of Honshu. 1) pond near hotel, with Mandarin Ducks; 2) couple of hours birding at Go-no-ike reservoir adjacent to Kamisu city hall; then on to 3) port of Choshi, where we had lunch at a seafood restaurant and birded several spots around port waterfront; and finally 4) late afternoon birding to sunset at Tone River reed beds. On to Hotel Seaside Edogawa in Kasai, Tokyo for the night.

**Day 4** Tuesday, January 13: Birded before breakfast, walking trails in the large park surrounding Hotel Seaside Edogawa through a mix of wooded areas, marsh edges, and near Tokyo Bay. Departed after breakfast for Karuizawa in the Japanese Alps, stopping enroute to bird in the mountains at Ura-Myogi. Night at Shiotsubo Onsen Hotel & Spa in Karuizawa.

**Day 5** Wednesday, January 14: Birded before and after breakfast along trails and watched bird feeders in the snowy landscape within walking distance of Shiotsubo Onsen. Trails were in Karuizawa Wild Bird Forest and along Kose Forest Path. After lunch, departed to Chikuma River and Tokyo Electric Corp's reservoir in Saku City in Nagano Prefecture. Night at Haneda Excel Hotel Tokyu in Terminal 2 of Haneda Airport, Tokyo.

**Day 6** Thursday, January 15: Morning flight from Haneda to southern main island of Kyushu. We first visited Takae reservoir and rice fields in Satsuma/Sendai. Later stopped at seaside viewpoint Michi-no-eki Akune. Late afternoon to Arasaki Crane Reserve to take in the sunset spectacle of thousands of cranes flying to nighttime roost. Night Hotel King, Izumi.

**Day 7** Friday, January 16: Prior to breakfast, walked streamside trails near Hotel King. After breakfast, visited Arasaki Crane Reserve, where we would spend the bulk of the day. We first watched an immense gathering of White-naped and Hooded cranes, then located the rare cranes (Sandhill, Eurasian/Common) at the feeding ground in an adjacent area. After looking for buntings and Penduline-tits at reedbeds in the reserve, we returned toward Izumi to look for Crested Kingfisher from a bridge near Kogawa Dam. Second night Hotel King.

**Day 8** Saturday, January 17: First part of morning, returned to bridge near Kogawa Dam, where all were able to see shy Crested Kingfisher. Then birded a woodland trail along Kogawa Dam reservoir and from atop the dam itself. Drove north to bird near two river mouths in Yatsushiro City in Kumamoto Prefecture, Kuma River and Hikawa River, as well as through adjacent agricultural areas. Night at traditional inn, the Yunomoto-Onsen Ryokan in Miyazaki.

**Day 9** Sunday, January 18: Morning birding at Miike, a part of the Kirishima-Yaku National Park on Kyushu, in the forest and walking along the lake edge. Mid-afternoon flight from Kagoshima back to Haneda, where we caught a second flight to Kushiro on the island of

Hokkaido. Arriving in Kushiro, met by Koji, who would help guide us on Hokkaido. Dinner and night at Hotel Taito in Tsurui.

- Day 10** Monday, January 19: Before sunrise, assembled at Otowa bridge in Tsurui to watch roost of Red-crowned Cranes on the river. After breakfast, visited private landowner's (the Crane Lady) crane feeding site in Tsurui Village, then Tsurui-Itoh Crane Sanctuary. Later, Koji took us to a spot in the forest where a Ural Owl was visible on a day roost. Traveled through other areas in nearby eastern Hokkaido, including Kayanuma where Koji led us to a spot we saw a Ural Owl on a day roost. Midday birding and lunch at Ainu restaurant at Lake Kussharo, where Whooper Swans were gathered in the steam of a thermal pool. Continued on to lodging in Yoroushi. Saw first Blakiston's Fish-Owls just as we arrived at this hotel. Dinner and night at Yuyado Daiichi, Yoroushi.
- Day 11** Tuesday, January 20: During breakfast, watched Eurasian Jays and other birds coming to feeders by hotel. Departed for birding along eastern shore of Hokkaido, including Notsuke Peninsula, for sea eagles and Snow Buntings, before taking an afternoon birding cruise from Ochiishi (Hanasaki harbor) among offshore islands, where alcids, sea ducks, and cormorants were seen. Returned to lovely Yuyado Daiichi for a second night.
- Day 12** Wednesday, January 21: Bird feeder watching again, before departing Yoroushi. Lunch and crane watching at Akan Kokusai Tsuru (Crane) Center. On to Kushiro airport for afternoon flight to Haneda. Farewell dinner and night at Haneda Hotel Tokyu in Haneda Terminal 2.
- Day 13** Thursday, January 22: Shuttle from Haneda for departures from Narita Airport.

## FIELD LIST

**NOTE:** species in **bold** are unusual to rare sightings for Japan; alternate common names in ( )

### KEY:

**P** = optional pre-tour outing 1/11/15

**HN** = Honshu

**K** = Kyushu

**HK** = Hokkaido

**ABBREVIATIONS:** AOU = American Ornithological Union;  
BOU = British Ornithological Union;  
IOC/IOU = International Ornithological Committee/Union

## **BIRDS**

### **WATERFOWL: GEESE, SWANS & DUCKS (Anatidae)**

Taiga Bean-Goose (*Anser fabalis*) – P; approximately 80 in a field near Edosaki.

Tundra Bean-Goose (*Anser serrirostris*) – P; a single goose among swans in the Motono paddies

Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus columbianus*) – P. At Motono Village swan sanctuary on pre-trip outing, hundreds of Bewick's type Tundra Swans were the predominant swan present. (*Cygnus columbianus bewickii*) is considered by some European and Asian authorities a distinct species, Bewick's Swan (*C. bewickii*). We also scoped one Tundra Swan at Motono with minimal yellow on the bill, which fit the profile of the typical North American "Whistling" Tundra Swan, *C. c. columbianus*.

Whooper Swan (*Cygnus cygnus*) – P, HK. Superb views of these large swans with lots of yellow at bill base at Lake Kussharo on Hokkaido; a few family groups were mixed in with the smaller "Bewick's" Swans at Motono swan sanctuary on pre-trip.

Common Shelduck (*Tadorna tadorna*) – K. These large, boldly patterned waterfowl were seen at several locations on Kyushu, including Arasaki and the Kuma and Hikawa River mouths.

Mandarin Duck (*Aix galericulata*) – P, HN, K. Excellent scope views the first morning of the tour, where at least 80 Mandarin Ducks were at a small wooded pond near Narita View Hotel. On Kyushu, a skittish flock of 300+ flew back and forth at Takae reservoir; others at the lake behind Kogawa Dam.

Gadwall (*Anas strepera*) – HN, K

Falcated Duck (*Anas falcata*) – P, K. Nice scope views of these elegant ducks on the pre-trip outing on Inbanuma reservoir, and later in the tour at Kuma River mouth.

Eurasian Wigeon (*Anas penelope*) – HN, K; a numerous duck where seen on the tour

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – widespread, seen on all three islands

Eastern Spot-billed Duck (*Anas zonorhyncha*) – P, HN, K, HK; plentiful, large dabbler

Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) – HN, K; only a few

Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*) – P, HN, K; abundant on Honshu and at Arasaki on Kyushu

**Baikal Teal** (*Anas formosa*) – P, HN. We worked a bit to get scope views of male Baikal Teal just before sunset at Inbanuma reservoir, where there were at least 20 and perhaps twice that many of this scarce wintering species. The final day on Honshu, we scoped a male at the reservoir near Chikuma River, for spectacular views of this ornately plumaged duck.

Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*) – P, HN, K. British Ornithological Union (BOU) splits Green-winged Teal typical of North America as *Anas carolinensis* from Eurasian/Common Teal as *Anas crecca*. American Ornithological Union still considers the two as subspecies (*A. crecca carolinensis* and *A. crecca crecca*). The Eurasian form was common on Honshu and Kyushu.

Common Pochard (*Aythya ferina*) – P, HN, K. Especially good views of this species at a marshy pond at Kasai Seaside Park, one of several spots we saw them on the main island.

Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*) – P, HN, K

Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*) – HN, HK; thousands rafted up on Tokyo Bay, from Seaside Park

Harlequin Duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – HN, HK; a few at Choshi port on Honshu, others in eastern Hokkaido, including on the boat trip out of Ochiishi

White-winged Scoter (*Melanitta fusca*). HN, HK. Some authorities split White-winged into three species, and in their taxonomy the "White-winged" Scoter seen in Japan is

Stejneger's Scoter (*M. stejnegeri*). BOU splits Velvet (*M. fusca*) and White-winged (*M. deglandi*), with *stejnegeri* considered just a subspecies of White-winged. AOU hasn't yet split them. A few seen both at Choshi and on the Ochiishi boat trip.

Black Scoter (*Melanitta americana*). HN, HK. Hundreds along the east shore of Hokkaido, where it was the most prevalent sea duck, and some on the Ochiishi boat trip. AOU recently split Black Scoter from Common Scoter (*M. nigra*); Japanese wintering birds are *M. americana*, although vagrant *M. nigra* could occur.

Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*) – HK, seen on the boat trip.

Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) – HN, HK; common along Hokkaido east shore

Smew (*Mergellus albellus*) – P, HN. Seen well at Go-no-ike reservoir, among other spots.

White males with fine black patterning were especially striking.

Common Merganser (*Mergus merganser*) – HN, HK. Common Merganser/Goosander in Eurasia is a different subspecies (*M. m. merganser*) than in North America (*M. m. americana*).

Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*) – HK. Seen from Notsuke Peninsula and in Hanasaki harbor, the starting point of the Ochiishi cruise.

### **PHEASANTS, GROUSE & ALLIES (Phasianidae)**

Chinese Bamboo-Partridge (*Bambusicola thoracicus*) – K. Judith saw one at Miike.

### **LOONS (Gaviidae)**

Red-throated Loon (Red-throated Diver) (*Gavia stellata*) – HK.

### **GREBES (Podicipedidae)**

Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) – P, HN, K; nearly ubiquitous on fresh water ponds, reservoirs and streams, and salt water bays

Horned (Slavonian) Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*) – HN; distantly at Choshi

Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*) – HK; one on the boat trip, in the harbor

Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*) – P, HN; large, slim and pale grebes, seen well on Honshu reservoirs and at Choshi. Hundreds in close formation on Tokyo Bay, from Seaside Pk.

Eared (Black-necked) Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*) – P, HN

### **CORMORANTS & SHAGS (Phalacrocoracidae)**

Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) – P, HN, K

Temminck's/Japanese Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax capillatus*) – HN, K. Hundreds at Choshi.

Pelagic Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) – HN, HK; at Choshi and Ochiishi

### **HERONS, EGRETS & BITTERNs (Ardeidae)**

Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) – P, HN, K; widespread, many nice views

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) – P, HN, K. The subspecies seen in Japan is *A. alba modesta*, in North America *A. alba alba*; some split the Asian form as Eastern Great Egret (*A. modesta*)

Little Egret (*Ardea garzetta*) – P, HN, K

### **IBISES & SPOONBILLS (Threskiornithidae)**

Eurasian Spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*) – K; scarce in Japan by range (we saw only 3), we scoped a couple at Arasaki, alongside smaller Black-faced Spoonbills

**Black-faced Spoonbill** (*Platalea minor*) – HN,K. An endangered species with a very small wintering distribution in southern Japan. Best views were those on a high tide roost on the Hikawa River.

### **OSPREY (Pandionidae)**

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) – HN,K; one on Kyushu caught a long needlefish

### **HAWKS, EAGLES & KITES (Accipitridae)**

**Mountain (Hodgson's) Hawk-Eagle** (*Nisaetus [Spizaetus] nipalensis*) – HN. One of the top sightings of the tour, we watched a pair soaring among the mountaintops of Ura-Myogi, and scoped one as it perched above a sheer cliff face. This was the first time the scarce species had been seen on VENT's Japan in Winter tour.

Eastern Marsh Harrier (*Circus spilonotus*) – P,HN; nice views of this large harrier species early in the tour

Northern (Hen) Harrier (*Circus cyaneus*). K. Known in Europe and Asia as Hen Harrier, some European authors split Northern Harrier of North America as *Circus hudsonius* from Hen Harrier of Eurasia as *Circus cyaneus*. The two males we saw were paler overall than North American harriers.

Black (Black-eared) Kite (*Milvus migrans*) – Seen on all three islands and nearly every day of the tour, this scavenger was a familiar sight on the tour, observed soaring on broad wings with wide, notched tail. Heard whinnying at several sites.

White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) – HK; Bald Eagle-sized, we saw at least 15 altogether in eastern Hokkaido, sometimes alongside the larger Steller's Sea-Eagle.

Steller's Sea-Eagle (*Haliaeetus pelagicus*) – HK. First seen as we drove into the interior of eastern Hokkaido from Tsurui, we had great looks at this enormous eagle on the Notsuke Peninsula. A massive bird of prey and one of the very largest eagles, Steller's has a rather small geographic range in northeast Asia.

Common Buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) – P,HN,K,HK; a few seen on each of the three islands, most soaring.

### **RAILS, GALLINULES & COOTS (Rallidae)**

Water Rail (*Rallus aquaticus*) – HN; heard, and Mary caught a glimpse in Kasai Seaside Park.

Eurasian/Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) – K. Good views of several on the stream near Hotel King. The European and Asian version of this bird is now considered a distinct species from North American Common Gallinule (*Gallinula galeata*), a split recognized by AOU in 2011.

Eurasian (Common) Coot (*Fulica atra*) – P,HN,K

### **CRANES (Gruidae)**

**Sandhill Crane** (*Grus canadensis*) – K. A rare, annual straggler to Kyushu at Arasaki, we saw one adult and possibly an immature.

White-naped Crane (*Grus vipio*) – K. We saw thousands of these silvery, tall, red-faced cranes at Arasaki, where 40-50% of the world population winters.

**Common/Eurasian Crane** (*Grus grus*) – K. Rare annual straggler to Kyushu, we saw at least 5 at Arasaki.

Hooded Crane (*Grus monacha*) – K. Thousands of these small, dark cranes at Arasaki, where 80% of the world population winters, among the taller, paler White-naped Cranes.

Red-crowned Crane (*Grus japonensis*) – HK. The most revered crane in Japan (also known as Japanese Crane) and an important cultural icon in the country. Endangered. We first saw them at sunrise in the river shallows at Tsurui. Excellent views and photo opportunities of feeding and sometimes dancing cranes at Tsurui at a private landowner's crane feeding site, as well as Tsurui-Itoh Crane Sanctuary, and later at Akan Crane Center.

### **PLOVERS & LAPWINGS (Charadriidae)**

Black-bellied/Gray Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*) – K; one of the most widespread birds in the world, on all continents except Antarctica

Northern Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*) – P,HN,K. One very striking bird, and we had excellent views of lapwings at Arasaki and elsewhere. With green and purple iridescence, and fancy spiked crest, a very fancy shorebird.

Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) – HN, K. Close views on mudflats of Kumagawa River. Kentish Plover was split from the similar North American species, Snowy Plover (*Charadrius nivosus*), by AOU in 2011.

Long-billed Plover (*Charadrius placidus*) – HN,K. Seen well on Chikuma River gravel and on stream near Hotel King. A localized Asian endemic that specializes in foraging along shallow, rushing streams.

### **SANDPIPERS & ALLIES (Scolopacidae)**

Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – P,HN,K; seen at several sites, always bobbing its tail

Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) –K; dark tringid, reminiscent of Solitary Sandpiper

Common Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*) – HN,K; great views from blinds at Seaside Park and on river mudflats on Kyushu

Eurasian Curlew (*Numenius arquata*) – HN; several roosting atop pilings along Tokyo Bay

**Temminck's Stint** (*Calidris temminckii*) – K. A very scarce wintering species in southern Japan, we saw 2-3 in a wet field at Arasaki, in the same field as lapwings and Dunlin.

Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) – HN,K; another very widespread species

Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*). P,HN,K. Excellent views at several rice paddies. A distinct species from the snipe formerly known as Common Snipe in North America, now classified as Wilson's Snipe (*G. delicata*).

### **AUKS, MURRES & PUFFINS (Alcidae)**

Thick-billed Murre (Brunnich's Guillemot) (*Uria lomvia*) – HK; 1 near the boat at Ochiishi

**Pigeon Guillemot** (*Cephus columba*) – HK; a scant visitor to the area, Koji spotted one

Spectacled Guillemot (*Cephus carbo*) – HK. With its range restricted mostly to Sea of Okhotsk, this alcid is a true regional specialty.

Ancient Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*) – HK; a few on the boat trip at close range

Least Auklet (*Aethia pusilla*) – HK; smallest alcid in the world

## **GULLS, TERNS & SKIMMERS (Laridae)**

**Saunders's Gull** (*Saundersilarus saundersi*) – K. At Hikawa and Kuma river mouths, we saw at least several dozen, both in flight and on the mudflats, of this vulnerable and range-restricted species.

Black-headed Gull (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – HN,K; posed nicely for photos, perched on a rope

Black-tailed Gull (*Larus crassirostris*) – HN,K; numerous at Choshi

Mew Gull/Common Gull (*Larus canus*) – HN,HK. Most taxonomic authorities split the Mew Gull of North America as *L. brachyrhynchus* from Common Gull of Eurasia as *L. canus*, but AOU is behind on this trend.

Herring Gull/Vega Gull (*Larus argentatus/L. vegae*) – HN,K,HK. AOU has yet to adopt the split of Vega Gull of east Asia from Herring Gull of North America, although most authorities favor this split. Therefore, according to AOU, the Vega Gulls we saw in Japan are *Larus argentatus vegae*, a subspecies.

**Heuglin's Gull/Lesser Black-backed Gull** (*Larus heuglini/L. fuscus heuglini*) – K. 1 perched on the same structure as the roosting Black-faced Spoonbills on the Hikawa River.

Taxonomic issues surround this species. Some authorities consider it a subspecies of Lesser Black-backed Gull; others consider the *taimyrensis* form we saw a hybrid of Vega and Heuglin's gulls.

Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*) – HN,K,HK; the large, very dark backed gulls

Glaucous-winged Gull (*Larus glaucescens*) – HN,HK; a few at Choshi and Hokkaido

Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) – HN,HK; alongside Slaty-backed Gulls on Hokkaido

## **PIGEONS & DOVES (Columbidae)**

Rock Pigeon (*Columba livia*) – P,HN,K,HK

Oriental Turtle-Dove (*Streptopelia orientalis*) – P,HN,K; this handsome dove was common in places, especially in wooded parks

White-bellied Green (Japanese) Pigeon (*Treron sieboldii*) – K. First time seen on this tour in three years, we saw dozens in flight near Takae reservoir where we also scoped a beautiful male with chartreuse head and breast and purplish wing.

## **OWLS (Strigidae)**

**Blakiston's Fish-Owl** (*Ketupa blakistoni*) – HK. Always one of the most anticipated birds of the tour, we were fortunate to see two of them just as we first arrived after dark at our inn in Yoroushi. The huge owls plucked fish from the stream behind the inn, and posed for decent photos in the lighting outside. One of the world's great birds.

**Ural Owl** (*Strix uralensis*) – HK. Koji took us to a spot near Kayanuma where we were able to scope one of these large owls on its day roost, in large tree cavity.

## **KINGFISHERS (Alcedinidae)**

Common Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) – K; scintillating blue little kingfisher

Crested Kingfisher (*Megaceryle [Ceryl] lugubris*) – K. After a couple of near misses on seeing this hoped for bird, we had close views of a pair of these huge, zebra-striped kingfishers flying in close chase right over our vantage point on a bridge near from Kogawa dam.

### **WOODPECKERS (Picidae)**

Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos kizuki*) – P,HN,K,HK. A tiny woodpecker, we saw them at a variety of spots on Honshu, Kyushu and Hokkaido – including right outside Narita View Hotel.

White-backed Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos leucotos*) – HK. An uncommon species, we had an excellent study this large and red-bellied woodpecker in bare trees at Lake Kussharo.

Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*) – HN,HK. A flashy woodpecker with rosy vent, we had several good views at different spots, including in Karuizawa and Yoroushi at feeding stations.

Japanese (Green) Woodpecker (*Picus awokera*) – HN; nice views of single birds at two spots along the forest trails in the Japanese Alps.

### **FALCONS (Falconidae)**

Eurasian Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) – K

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) – HN

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) – HN,HK; two flew around outside the restaurant at the port of Choshi while we were having lunch

### **CUCKOO-SHRIKES (Campephagidae)**

**Ryuku Minivet** (*Pericrocotus tegimae*) – K; seen briefly by some at Takae Dam

### **SHRIKES (Laniidae)**

Bull-headed Shrike (*Lanius bucephalus*) – P,HN,K; handsome small shrike feathered in warm rufous, seen almost daily on Honshu and Kyushu

### **CROWS, JAYS & MAGPIES (Corvidae)**

Eurasian Jay (*Garrulus glandarius*) – HN,HK. A beautiful jay, rusty brown with a patch of blue in the wing. We saw subspecies *japonicus* on Honshu and *brandtii* on Hokkaido, the latter sometimes split as Brandt's Jay. Two very different looking forms.

Azure-winged Magpie (*Cyanopica cyanus*) – HN. Seen along the wooded trails near Seaside Edogawa Hotel in the morning, the only place we saw them. Some authorities split the very disjunct population of a similar magpie found only in the Iberian Peninsula as Iberian Azure-winged Magpie, *C. cooki*.

**Daurian Jackdaw** (*Corvus dauuricus*) – K. In a large flock of Rooks at Takae farmland were a number of the smaller Daurian Jackdaws, all of dark (slate and black) rather than black and white plumage.

Rook (*Corvus frugilegus*) – K; large flocks at or near Arasaki

Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*) – P,HN,K,HK

Large-billed Crow (*Corvus macrorhynchus*) – P,HN,K,HK. The larger crow of the trip, with large and humped bill and a remarkable vocabulary of comical calls.

### **LARKS (Alaudidae)**

Sky Lark/Eurasian Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) – P,HN,K; good scope views at Arasaki; some singing on Kyushu too.

## **SWALLOWS & MARTINS (Hirundinidae)**

Asian House Martin (*Delichon dasypus*) –K; a flock of 40-50 over the stream in Izumi

## **CHICKADEES & TITS (Paridae)**

Marsh Tit (*Poecile palustris*) – HK; the tiny chickadee lookalike on snowy Hokkaido

Willow Tit (*Poecile montanus*) – HN; another tiny chickadee seen only at Karuizawa

Varied Tit (*Sittiparus varius*) – P,HN,K,HK. Widespread over the course of the tour, including right near Narita View Hotel, we had many views of this colorfully patterned tit.

Coal Tit (*Periparus ater*) – HN,HK; best views at Karuizawa lodge feeders

Japanese (Great) Tit (*Parus minor*) – P,HN,K,HK. IOC splits Great Tit into 3 species, and those in Japan are considered Japanese Tit (*Parus minor*), same as what Mark Brazil terms Eastern Great Tit.

## **PENDULINE-TITS (Remizidae)**

Chinese Penduline-Tit (*Remiz consobrinus*) – K. in the reed beds near Arasaki, we had good views of as many as ten of these diminutive, attractive birds.

## **LONG-TAILED TITS (Aegithalidae)**

Long-tailed Tit (*Aegithalos caudatus*) – HN,K. Like a bushtit feathered in white, black, and pink, often foraging in mixed flocks with other typical tit species.

## **NUTHATCHES (Sittidae)**

Eurasian Nuthatch (*Sitta euroapea*) – HN,K,HK. First seen at Karuizawa and Miike, where the buff bellied subspecies *amurensis* were typical. Later saw the white-bellied subspecies *asiatica* on Hokkaido.

## **TREECREEPERS (Certhiidae)**

Eurasian Treecreeper– HK. Two were creeping up trunks near Lake Kussharo.

## **WRENS (Troglodytidae)**

Eurasian Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) – HN,K,HK. Seen at several different spots, this tiny wren was formerly part of the Winter Wren species, which is now three species.

## **DIPPERS (Cinclidae)**

Brown Dipper (*Cinclus pallasii*) – HN,K,HK. First seen at the small dam at Ura-Myogi, later on the Crested Kingfisher stream on Kyushu and on the stream behind the inn at Yoroushi on Hokkaido.

## **BULBULS (Pycnonotidae)**

Brown-eared Bulbul (*Hypsipetes amaurotis*) –ubiquitous, except in the snowiest spots

## **KINGLETS (Regulidae)**

Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*) – HN,HK; seen nicely in the trees at Akan Crane Center

## **BUSH-WARBLERS & ALLIES (Cettidae)**

Japanese Bush-Warbler (*Cettia diphone*) – P,HN,K. Great views, ultimately for everyone, of this very difficult skulker.

### **CISTICOLAS & ALLIES (Cisticolidae)**

Zitting Cisticola (*Cisticola juncidis*) – K. In a rice paddy adjacent to the Arasaki visitor center.

### **YUHNAS, WHITE-EYES & ALLIES (Zosteropidae)**

Japanese White-eye (*Zosterops japonicus*) – P,HN,K; pairs and small flocks, often near flowers

### **LAUGHINGTHRUSHES & ALLIES (Leiothrichidae)**

Hwamei/Chinese Hwamei (AKA Melodious Laughingthrush) (*Garrulax canorus*) – HN; a few foraging near the roadside at Ura-Myogi; in Japan, introduced on Honshu

### **OLD WORLD FLYCATCHERS (Muscicapidae)**

Red-flanked Bluetail (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) – HN,K. We saw a number of female and male plumaged birds, very striking blue tail and red flanks when seen well.

Daurian Redstart (*Phoenicurus aureus*) – HN,K. Tiny gems, and happily perching low and in the open. [Daurian refers to the region of Transbaikal, also known as Dauria, of southeastern Siberia to the east of lake Baikal.]

Blue Rock-Thrush (*Monticola solitarius*) – K. A strikingly blue and rufous male turned up near Takae reservoir.

### **THRUSHES & ALLIES (Turdidae)**

Pale Thrush (*Turdus pallidus*) – HN,K. Quite a few seen on both Honshu and Kyushu.

Brown-headed Thrush (*Turdus chrysolaus*) – P,HN. Seen by the whole group at Seaside Park, and by some near Narita View Hotel. Very similar to American Robin, at a glance.

Dusky Thrush (*Turdus eunomus*) – P,HN,K,HK; widespread and common winter visitor

### **STARLINGS (Sturnidae)**

European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) – K. Surprisingly scarce and local in Japan, where they are of natural origin rather than introduced. A flock of 25+ at Arasaki.

White-cheeked Starling (*Sturnus cineraceus*) – P,HN,K

### **ACCENTORS (Prunellidae)**

Japanese Accentor (*Prunella rubida*) – HN; Judith saw one at Ura-Myogi, others saw one at seed feeder outside inn at Karuizawa

### **WAGTAILS & PIPITS (Motacillidae)**

Forest Wagtail (*Dendroanthus indicus*) – K. Vagrant to Japan from the Asian mainland, we saw one at Miike, where it has appeared now two years in a row in precisely the same spot, and where it attracts many local bird photographers. Kaz first found this particular bird in November 2013, and we were fortunate that it returned this winter.

Gray Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) – K; seen regularly along streams, gray with yellow flanks

White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) – P,HN,K,HK; seen in many open habitats, with a seeming special preference for parking lots

Japanese Wagtail (*Motacilla grandis*) – P,HN,K; the mostly black wagtail, endemic to Japan

Olive-backed Pipit (*Anthus hodgsoni*) – K; walking slowly across the forest floor at Miike

Buff-bellied/American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*) – P,HN,K. The pipit seen in plowed fields and rice paddies, known as Buff-bellied in Eurasia and American in North America. The prevalent subspecies in Japan is *japonicus*, which also strays to western Alaska.

## **LONGSPURS & SNOW BUNTINGS**

**Snow Bunting** (*Plectrophenax nivalis*) – H. About 13 near Notsuke Peninsula.

## **BUNTINGS, SPARROWS & ALLIES (Emberizidae)**

Meadow Bunting (*Emberiza cioides*) – P,HN,K. Handsome bunting with bold dark face pattern.

Chestnut-eared Bunting (*Emberiza fucata*) – K; Kaz scoped a couple in the brush near Arasaki reed beds

Rustic Bunting (*Emberiza rustica*) – P,HN; in brushy areas near Inbanuma reservoir and Tone River, appeared more crested than other buntings except Elegant.

Yellow-throated (Elegant) Bunting (*Emberiza elegans*) – K; nice views along trail near Kogawa Dam, males golden yellow with bold face pattern and tall crest

Black-faced Bunting (*Emberiza spodocephala*) – P,HN,K; seen daily on the two southern islands, a shy bird that kept to the underbrush, but patience allowed us good views

Gray Bunting (*Emberiza variabilis*) – K; a few of these very secretive buntings were glimpsed briefly at Miike

Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) – HN,K; best views in reed beds at Arasaki, alongside Chinese Penduline-Tits

## **SISKINS, CROSSBILLS & ALLIES (Fringillidae)**

Brambling (*Fringilla montifringilla*) – HN; a flock in the treetops near our inn at Karuizawa

Eurasian Bullfinch (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula*) – HK. Wonderful views of this beautiful, rose-faced finch as they worked frozen berries in a tree near Tsurui crane center

Long-tailed Rosefinch (*Uragus sibiricus*) – HN; a female showed well on our pre-breakfast walk in snowy Karuizawa

Oriental Greenfinch (*Chloris sinica*) – P,HN,K; some flocks numbering in the hundreds

Hawfinch (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*) – HN,HK; single birds seen at Kamisu City park, Karuizawa, and Lake Kussharo

Japanese Grosbeak (*Eophona personata*) – HN,K; first seen at Karuizawa, we later came on another flock in the treetops during the river walk near Hotel King

## **OLD WORLD SPARROWS (Passeridae)**

Russet Sparrow (*Passer rutilans*) – K; near the Arasaki visitor center

Eurasian Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*) – widespread, common

## **MAMMALS**

Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) – HK

Sika [Deer] (*Cervus nippon*) – HK; deer with rather short faces compared to North American species, Sika were numerous on Hokkaido

Japanese Squirrel (*Sciurus lis*) – HN

Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*) – HN. A true species of wild suid, not a domestic pig that has gone feral. Many subspecies, including *leucomystax* on the southern main islands of Japan, including Honshu where we saw it during the drive down from Ura-Myogi.