

**JAPAN IN WINTER  
A CRANE & SEA-EAGLE SPECTACLE!**

**JANUARY 23–FEBRUARY 4, 2016**

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

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**By Bob Sundstrom**

We were three days into VENT's 2016 *Japan in Winter* tour. Our route that day took us from Edogawa Seaside Park on Tokyo Bay into the interior of Honshu, and on into the Japanese Alps. Mid-afternoon found us at Ura-Myogi, in the snowy foothills of the Alps, at a likely spot for an hour of birding along the mountain road we were ascending. We walked along the narrow road, which ran through wooded country and alongside a sparkling stream.

At first the woods were quiet, little bird activity at hand. But careful scanning up and down the stream—aided by a couple of distinctive call notes—brought a view of the first Brown Dipper of the tour, as it splashed into the stream. This Asian dipper species is dark chocolate-brown, and seems to blend into the environment cryptically just as well as gray ones. As the Brown Dipper bobbed on its legs atop a stone in the stream, a second dipper appeared—and the chase was on, up the stream out of sight.

So we ambled downhill along the road. Before long, Wolfgang, one of our group, called for us to check out a raptor soaring above. All binoculars were soon fixed on a Mountain Hawk-Eagle, lazily drifting on high—a scarce and massive bird of prey that we were truly lucky to see. Amazing!

A bit farther down the road, a flock of birds rustled in the dense trees. One bird flew out of the trees to perch in a bare sapling right above the group: our first Brambling of the tour, a lovely Old World finch that winters in parts of Japan. Then someone noticed a bird ahead, pecking at the ground near the edge of the road. We quickly had our scopes and binoculars trained on the new sighting: it was an Asian Rosy-Finch, an Alpine specialty like other rosy-finches, which had likely been pushed down to this elevation by the recent snows. And a really tough bird to find here, even in winter. So our good fortune was continuing.

A male Daurian Redstart showed next, boldly painted in orange, black, and gray. A very confiding bird it was, perching low and staying close by the group as the cameras took it in. We had only an hour to walk the road, and already we had seen some wonderful birds. Finally the bus caught up with us and we boarded. But not a hundred meters down the road, another bird was spotted from the bus, and we came to a quick halt and disembarked. Kaz had spotted a male Elegant or Yellow-throated Bunting, a gorgeous bunting with peaked crest, yellow throat and breast, and bold face pattern. The bunting was good enough to stay right by the roadside, where we enjoyed it for a few minutes before it flitted out of view.

The Japan in Winter tour is billed as a “crane and sea-eagle spectacle,” and it more than lives up to its title. But there are many other birds and other wildlife to enjoy on the tour, as this hour along a mountain road makes clear. 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. That’s more than 1,000 miles of latitude, with distinctly different birds on each island. On the 2016 tour we saw five species of cranes, including the endangered Red-crowned Crane, which has a resident population on Japan’s northern island of Hokkaido. We watched hundreds of Red-crowned Cranes at close range, many pairs calling in unison and performing courtship dances. We first saw Red-crowned Cranes at sunrise, as a flock of hundreds stood in the icy shallows of a river turned pink by the first rays of sun.

On the southerly island of Kyushu, we had nearly a full day at Arasaki Crane Reserve. The reserve is winter home to spectacular concentrations of cranes, more than 17,000 in 2016, including a large proportion of all the world’s statuesque White-naped Cranes and smaller Hooded Cranes. We viewed cranes during the day, picking out a few vagrant Common (Eurasian) Cranes and Sandhill Cranes among the masses. We also watched in awe during the sunset fly-in of thousands of cranes from adjacent fields to a shallow lake nearby. Long skeins of cranes called loudly in flight as they passed by our vantage point. An astounding sight!

Japan in winter also boasts one of the world’s finest selections of gorgeous waterfowl: such beauties as Smew, Baikal Teal, Falcated Duck, and Mandarin Duck among more than 20 species of ducks, plus concentrations of enormous Whooper Swans, some basking in the warmth of steaming thermal pools, and Taiga Bean-Geese. On Kyushu we had great studies of two global rarities: Black-faced Spoonbill and Saunder’s Gull. A two-hour boat trip along Hokkaido’s east coast gave us close views of Spectacled Guillemot, a regional specialty, as well as other alcids like Least Auklet, and many Long-tailed Ducks and Harlequin Ducks. Over the course of the tour we saw such Japanese endemics as Japanese Wagtail and Japanese Woodpecker, and other species tied to only slightly broader ranges: tiny Japanese Pygmy-Woodpeckers, huge Japanese Grosbeaks, and Long-billed Plovers. There were other highly prized wintering buntings like Meadow, Rustic, and Black-faced; handsome Bull-headed Shrikes; pale blue Azure-winged Magpies; and a nice assortment of shorebirds including Temminck’s Stint and Marsh Sandpiper. A rare, for Japan, Forest Wagtail in a woodland on Kyushu added a fourth wagtail species to the trip and a remarkable rarity. And we had great views of two different Ural Owls on day roosts.

The last three full days of the tour take place on the northern island of Hokkaido, which is the winter home of stunning concentrations of perhaps the world’s most impressive eagle, Steller’s Sea-Eagle, which has a very small world range in northeast Asia. At one spot we saw at least 100 Steller’s Sea-Eagles, massive brown and white eagles with immense orange bills, standing on the ice of a frozen lake. The Steller’s towered over the scores of White-tailed Eagles that shared the ice with them, and White-tailed Eagles are the size of Bald Eagles. The equal of the cranes and eagles was another bird on Hokkaido—the world’s largest owl, Blakiston’s Fish-Owl, which we saw at close range at our lovely Japanese inn at Yoroushi. From the same vantage point where we watched fish-owls at night, in the morning—with the help of bird feeders—we watched a steady stream of Eurasian Jays, Great Spotted Woodpecker, and Marsh Tits. A rare, for Japan, Black Woodpecker worked on excavating a cavity on a tree nearby, as an equally rare and hard to see Solitary Snipe bobbed in the shallow, frigid stream just outside the windows.

Great birding was complemented by the wonderful cultural experience of traveling in three distinctly different islands of Japan, nights in superb Japanese inns, many wonderful traditional Japanese meals, and a great group ready for the next round of new experiences in Japan.

## **ITINERARY:**

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

**Day 2** Sunday, January 24: *Optional pre-trip outing with Kaz for early arrivals.*

Departed from Narita View Hotel mid-morning to several birding spots in the Narita vicinity: 1) swan sanctuary in Motono Village in Chiba Prefecture; 2) Edosaki town farming area (Taiga Bean Geese); 3) flooded rice paddies at Nishinosu for shorebirds; 4) Ukishima Marsh for harriers. Night at Narita View Hotel, Narita.

**Day 3** Monday, January 25: Departed Narita View Hotel toward birding sites on the east coast of the main island of Honshu. 1) small wooded, reservoir pond near hotel, with Baikal Teal and Mandarin Ducks; 2) Gonoike reservoir adjacent to Kamisu City Hall; 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 Hitachi-Tone River reed beds. On to Hotel Seaside Edogawa in Kasai, Tokyo for the night.

**Day 4** Tuesday, January 26: Birded before breakfast, walking trails in Kasai Seaside Park (which surrounds 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 at mid-elevation in the mountains at Ura-Myogi. Night at Shiotsubo Onsen Hotel & Spa in Karuizawa.

**Day 5** Wednesday, January 27: 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 28: Morning flight from Haneda to southern main island of Kyushu. We first visited Takae reservoir and rice fields of Satsuma-Sendai City. Later stopped at seaside viewpoint Michi-no-eki (Akune). Late afternoon/early evening 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 29: Rainy day, only one of tour. After breakfast, we first stopped at a bridge below Kogawa Dam, then at dam, in search of Crested Kingfisher. We would stop at these spots several times. Then to 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. Second night Hotel King.

**Day 8** Saturday, January 30: First part of morning, returned to bridge and Kogawa Dam, where we 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 Hika River, as well as through adjacent agricultural areas (in Kumamoto Prefecture). Night at traditional inn, the Yunomoto-Onsen Ryokan in Miyazaki.

- Day 9** Sunday, January 31: 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 Woody Hotel in Tsurui.
- Day 10** Monday, February 1: Before sunrise, assembled at Otowa bridge in Tsurui to watch roost of Red-crowned Cranes on the river. After breakfast, visited Tsurui-Itoh Crane Sanctuary. As most cranes were staying later than normal at Otowa, we returned there to watch cranes. Today Koji took us to two different sites in the forest where a Ural Owl was visible at 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. After further birding near Lake Kussharo, we 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, February 2: During breakfast, watched Eurasian Jays and other birds coming to feeders by hotel, as well as Solitary Snipe on stream. Drove on to Lake Fuhren (Fuhren-ko), where saw many Steller's Sea-Eagles and White-tailed Eagles at an ice-fishing spot. Early afternoon birding cruise from Ochiishi (Hanasaki harbor) among offshore islands, where alcids, sea ducks, and cormorants were seen; alternative local land birding for those not taking two-hour cruise. Returned to lovely Yuyado Daiichi for a second night.
- Day 12** Wednesday, February 3: Bird feeder watching again, before departing Yoroushi. Crane watching at Akan Kokusai Tsuru (Crane) Center and lunch nearby. On to Kushiro airport for mid-afternoon flight to Haneda. Farewell dinner and night at Haneda Hotel Tokyu in Haneda Terminal 2.
- Day 13** Thursday, February 4: Shuttle from Haneda for departures from Narita Airport.

**KEY:**

**P** = optional pre-tour outing 1/24/16

**HN** = Honshu

**K** = Kyushu

**HK** = Hokkaido

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

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

## **BIRDS:**

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

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

Mute Swan (*Cygnus olor*) – P; near Edosaki, on river adjacent to Taiga Bean-Goose flock; an introduced species

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, and others at Otowa Bridge in morning.

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 views the first morning of the tour, where we scoped some of the 20 or more Mandarin Ducks on a small wooded pond near Narita View Hotel. On Kyushu, fine scope views at Takae reservoir; a few behind Kogawa Dam.

Gadwall (*Anas strepera*) – HN, K

Falcated Duck (*Anas falcata*) – HN, K, HK. Best views of these elegant ducks were at Gonoike reservoir adjacent to Kamisu City Hall.

Eurasian Wigeon (*Anas penelope*) – HN, K, HK; abundant duck, especially on Kyushu

Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – P, HN, K, HK; widespread on all three islands

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

Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) – K; a few at Arasaki and Miike

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

Baikal Teal (*Anas formosa*) – P, HN. Nice views of two or three pairs at a pond with wooded edges near Narita View Hotel. A scarce wintering duck in the area of the tour, and one of the world's most beautifully plumaged waterfowl.

Green-winged (Common or Eurasian) 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.

Baikal X Green-winged/Eurasian Teal hybrid – Kaz spotted a hybrid male at Gonoike Reservoir

Common Pochard (*Aythya ferina*) – 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*) – HN, K, HK

Greater Scaup (*Aythya marila*) – HN, HK

Harlequin Duck (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – HK; roughly 80-100 seen on the Ochiishi boat trip

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

Long-tailed Duck (*Clangula hyemalis*) – HK, wonderful views of these beautiful sea ducks on the boat trip out of Ochiishi

Common Goldeneye (*Bucephala clangula*) – HK; Lake Kussharo and Ochiishi

Smew (*Mergellus albellus*) – HN. Surprisingly scarce this winter. We saw a few females and one male at Gonoike reservoir.

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 in Hanasaki harbor, the starting point of the Ochiishi cruise.

### **GREBES (Podicipedidae)**

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

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

Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*) – HN; large, slim and pale grebes seen at several spots on Honshu, with closest views at Gonoike and Choshi.

Eared (Black-necked) Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*) – HN. A remarkable, tight flock of 60+ at the point at Choshi, which dove synchronously again and again as we tried to scope them from atop the high point overlooking the mouth of the harbor.

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

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

Temminck's/Japanese Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax capillatus*) – HN, K. Hundreds at Choshi, lined up as they roosted on sea walls. Large cormorants, with even more white on the face than Great Cormorants. A few on Kyushu.

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

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

Gray Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) – P, HN, K; widespread, sometimes dozens in one place

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) – P, 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; looking much like North America's Snowy Egret

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

**Eurasian Spoonbill** (*Platalea leucorodia*) – K; scarce in Japan by range, we scoped a group of five at Arasaki; Kaz found one among the Black-faced Spoonbills roosting on Hikawa

**Black-faced Spoonbill** (*Platalea minor*) – HN, K. An endangered species with a very small wintering distribution in southern Japan. We saw the most ever for this tour, at least 40. Best views were those which posed for photos on a high tide roost on the Hikawa.

### **OSPREY (Pandionidae)**

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) – HN, K; fairly common on the Kyushu marine edge

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

**Mountain (Hodgson's) Hawk-Eagle** (*Nisaetus [Spizaetus] nipalensis*) – HN. A highly sought after sighting in Japan, where very scarce. Wolfgang called out attention to one soaring above as we birded along the roadway among the mountains at Ura-Myogi.

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

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 males we saw were paler overall than North American harriers.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*) – K; soaring at Kogawa Dam

Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) – HN,K; superb scope views of a perched goshawk at Kasai Seaside Park; one stooped on prey at Kogawa Dam on Kyushu, photographed by Wendy and showing the distinctive irregular tail banding of the species

Black (Black-eared) Kite (*Milvus migrans*) – P,HN,K,HK. 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; excellent views and photo opportunities at Lake Fuhren, often alongside larger Steller's Sea-Eagles

Steller's Sea-Eagle (*Haliaeetus pelagicus*) – HK. We had great looks at this enormous eagle on Lake Fuhren. A massive bird of prey and one of the very largest eagles, Steller's has a small geographic range in northeast Asia, and is present in Japan only on Hokkaido, and only in winter.

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

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

Water Rail (*Rallus aquaticus*) – P; likely the bird Wolfgang saw briefly at Nishinosu

Eurasian/Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) – K. Brief view for some at Arasaki, of a moorhen that walked up out of a ditch onto the road. 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,HK

## **CRANES (Gruidae)**

**Sandhill Crane** (*Grus canadensis*) – K. Rare but nearly annual straggler to the huge crane concentration at Arasaki. Kaz spotted three, all fairly close together.

White-naped Crane (*Grus vipio*) – K. Thousands of these statuesque silver and white cranes at Arasaki, where 40-50% of the world population winters.

**Common/Eurasian Crane** (*Grus grus*) – K. Rare annual straggler to Kyushu, we saw 3 at Arasaki, two very near the visitor center.

Hooded Crane (*Grus monacha*) – K. 80% of the world population winters at Arasaki, their thousands mixed among thousands of taller, paler White-naped Cranes.

Hooded X Common Crane hybrid – K; Kaz pointed this bird out near Arasaki visitor center



Red-crowned Crane (*Grus japonensis*) – HK. We first saw them first in the dawn light at Ottawa Bridge, in the thermally heated shallows. The most revered crane in Japan (also known as Japanese Crane) and an important cultural icon in the country and in China. Endangered, with world population estimated at around 2750. Excellent views and photo opportunities of feeding and sometimes dancing cranes 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. First seen on Honshu, the largest numbers of these striking, crested plovers were at Arasaki. Its green and purple iridescence, together with a spiky crest, make it a very memorable shorebird.

Kentish Plover (*Charadrius alexandrinus*) – 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 first on a Chikuma River gravel bar, then later along a similar stream on Kyushu. A regional Asian endemic that specializes in foraging along shallow, rushing streams.

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

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

Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) –K; first seen at Arasaki, a very dark-backed tringid

Common Greenshank (*Tringa nebularia*) – HN,K; fairly distant views on Kyushu mudflats

Marsh Sandpiper (*Tringa stagnatilis*) – P; a scant wintering species in Japan, we scoped two at Nishinosu rice paddies

Wood Sandpiper (*Tringa glareola*) – P; also at Nishinosu, a group of four

Temminck's Stint (*Calidris temminckii*) – K. A very scarce wintering species in Japan, we saw four at Nishinosu, a very nice find for the tour.

Dunlin (*Calidris alpina*) –K; another very widespread species; flock of 200+ at Arasaki

**Solitary Snipe** (*Gallinago solitaria*) – HK; a rarity in Japan, and rarely seen shorebird that is adapted to feeding in very cold streams

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

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

Pigeon Guillemot (*Cephus Columba snowi*) – HK; the *snowi* subspecies breeds only in Kuril Islands, and has much reduced or absent white wing patch typical of other Pigeon Guillemots; a scant visitor to the area, we saw one or two on the boat trip

Spectacled Guillemot (*Cephus carbo*) – HK. With its range restricted mostly to Sea of Okhotsk, this alcid is a true regional specialty. At least ten seen on boat trip.

Ancient Murrelet (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*) – HN, HK; first seen at Choshi, we also saw small numbers on the boat trip at close range

Least Auklet (*Aethia pusilla*) – HK; smallest alcid in the world, about ten from the boat, some of them quite close

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

**Saunders's Gull** (*Saundersilarus saundersi*) – K. A very range restricted and threatened species with small population, a couple dozen along the Hika and Kuma rivers foraging for crabs and other small invertebrates.

Black-headed Gull (*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*) – HN,K

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

Common Gull/Mew Gull (*Larus canus*) – HN. 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. We saw this species at Gonoike and Choshi.

Vega Gull/Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus/L. vegae*) – P,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.

**Iceland Gull** (*Larus glaucoides*) – HN. The first-cycle gull seen at Choshi (from the restaurant) was a first for the tour. Rare in Japan, but likely overlooked.

Slaty-backed Gull (*Larus schistisagus*) – HN,K,HK; the large, very dark backed gulls especially prevalent at Ochiishi on Hokkaido

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

Glaucous Gull (*Larus hyperboreus*) – HN,HK; ditto, although more prevalent than Glaucous-winged at both sites

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

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

Oriental Turtle-Dove (*Streptopelia orientalis*) – P,HN,K. An ornately feathered dove, seen best during the tour in wooded parks.

White-bellied Green (Japanese) Pigeon (*Treron sieboldii*) – K. A few in flight near Takae reservoir.

## **OWLS (Strigidae)**

**Blakiston's Fish-Owl** (*Ketupa blakistoni*) – HK. Certainly one of the marquee birds of the tour, given its rarity in Japan, immense size for an owl, and adaptation as a fishing owl. We were amazingly fortunate to see two of them just as we first arrived after dark at our inn in Yoroushi.

**Ural Owl** (*Strix uralensis*) – HK. Koji took us to two spots in eastern Hokkaido where we were able to scope one and photograph one of these large owls at each spot, on its day roost in a large tree cavity.

## **SWIFTS (Apodidae)**

**House Swift** (*Apus nipalensis nipalensis*) – K; resident species of swift in southern Japan; first time seen on this tour

## **KINGFISHERS (Alcedinidae)**

**Common Kingfisher** (*Alcedo atthis*) – K. A brilliant blue kingfisher, we saw one very well at Gonoike Reservoir.

Crested Kingfisher (*Megaceryle [Ceryl] lugubris*) – HK. Absent from its typical sites on Kyushu, some of the group saw this zebra-striped kingfisher from the their rooms at Yuyado Daiichi, as it perched over the stream behind the onsen resort.

### **WOODPECKERS (Picidae)**

Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos kizuki*) – HN,K. Seen at a variety of wooded spots on Honshu and Kyushu, a tiny woodpecker with brown barring.

Great Spotted Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*) – HN,HK. A boldly marked woodpecker with red vent, best views and photo opportunities were at the Yoroushi feeders.

**Black Woodpecker** (*Dryocopus martius*) – HK. Rare in northern Japan, we saw a male of this very large woodpecker species as it worked on a hole in a tree above the breakfast area at Yuyado Daiichi. An unexpected sighting, and a nice cap to the tour's excellent birds.

Japanese (Green) Woodpecker (*Picus awokera*) – HN,K; heard on Honshu at Karuizawa; after some work of locating a woodpecker heard tapping, we saw this endemic well at Miike.

### **FALCONS (Falconidae)**

Eurasian Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) – P,HN,K; good views at several spots

Merlin (*Falco columbarius*) – HN

Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) – P,K

### **SHRIKES (Laniidae)**

Bull-headed Shrike (*Lanius bucephalus*) – P,HN,K; Surprisingly prevalent in agricultural country on both Kyushu and Honshu, the males a pretty rufous brown.

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

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

Azure-winged Magpie (*Cyanopica cyanus*) – HN. Just as we were running out of time at Kasai Park, we found a flock of these pale blue, long-tailed birds along the wooded trails. (Most authorities split the very disjunct population of a similar magpie found only in the Iberian Peninsula as Iberian Azure-winged Magpie, *C. cooki*.)

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

Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*) – P,HN,K,HK; large crow with gruff voice

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

### **LARKS (Alaudidae)**

Sky Lark/Eurasian Skylark (*Alauda arvensis*) – HN,K; scope views at Arasaki

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

Asian House Martin (*Delichon dasypus*) – K; a flock of about 20 over the stream in Izumi

**Barn Swallow** (*Hirundo rustica*) – K; rare in winter on Kyushu

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

Marsh Tit (*Poecile palustris*) – HK. Similar in appearance to Willow Tit, this was the tiny chickadee lookalike on snowy Hokkaido.

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

Varied Tit (*Sittiparus varius*) – HN,K; colorfully patterned tit.

Coal Tit (*Periparus ater*) – HK; oddly missing at Karuizawa feeders, Kaz found a flock on Hokkaido near Akan Crane Sanctuary

Japanese (Eastern Great) Tit (*Parus minor*) – 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 describes as Eastern Great Tit.

Japanese X Varied Tit hybrid – HN; presumed hybrid, coming to feeders at our Karuizawa hotel, mostly Japanese Tit in appearance with rust on flanks and back of neck, like a Varied Tit

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

Long-tailed Tit (*Aegithalos caudatus*) – HN,K. Like a bushtit feathered in white, black, and pink. Best views at the kingfisher vigil bridge on Kyushu, where a flock foraged near the bridge.

### **NUTHATCHES (Sittidae)**

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

### **WRENS (Troglodytidae)**

Eurasian Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) – HN,K,HK. Tough little bird to get a prolonged look at, we watched one work in and out of a bank along the trail into Karuizawa Wild Bird Forest. Formerly part of the Winter Wren species, which is now three species.

### **DIPPERS (Cinclidae)**

Brown Dipper (*Cinclus pallasii*) – HN,K,HK. First seen at Ura-Myogi, later along Karuizawa Wild Bird Forest trail, and the kingfisher-vigil stream on Kyushu, and on the stream behind the inn at Yoroushi on Hokkaido.

### **BULBULS (Pycnonotidae)**

Brown-eared Bulbul (*Hypsipetes amaurotis*) – nearly ubiquitous

### **KINGLETS (Regulidae)**

Goldcrest (*Regulus regulus*) – HN,HK; some wonderful views of Japan's tiniest bird

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

Japanese Bush-Warbler (*Horornis diphone*) – HN,K. Good views of one working near the ground at Miike. Always a very difficult to see skulker.

**Dusky Warbler** (*Phylloscopus fuscatus*) – HN. Rare winter visitor to Japan, we had great views of one in and out the reeds at Kasai Seaside Park.

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

Japanese White-eye (*Zosterops japonicus*) – P,HN,K; mossy green with bold, white eye-ring

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

Hwamei/Chinese Hwamei (AKA Melodious Laughingthrush) (*Garrulax canorus*) – HN; seen by some at Ura-Myogi (introduced species)

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

Red-flanked Bluetail (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) – HN. Good views of a female in the snow-covered little community near our lodge at Karuizawa. The blue tail and reddish flanks were visible when bird stopped moving.

Daurian Redstart (*Phoenicurus auroreus*) – HN,K. We saw a number of these miniature gems, perching low and in the open; males especially colorful combination of ochre, gray and black. [*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 beautiful male at the sea overlook at Akune, which posed well for photos of its bright blue and rufous feathering.

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

Pale Thrush (*Turdus pallidus*) – HN,K. Seen at a variety of spots on Kyushu.

Brown-headed Thrush (*Turdus chrysolaus*) – HN. A male of the *orii* subspecies (with nearly all black head) was seen digging through the leaf litter at Seaside Park. This subspecies is an unexpected visitor here.

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

### **STARLINGS (Sturnidae)**

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

### **ACCENTORS (Prunellidae)**

Japanese Accentor (*Prunella rubida*) – HN; some of the group 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 three 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 very surprised that it returned for a third winter.

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

White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) – P,HN,K,HK; seen in many open habitats, with an unusual predilection for foraging in parking lots

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

Olive-backed Pipit (*Anthus hodgsoni*) – HN,K; walking slowly under the trees at Miike

Buff-bellied/American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*) – P,HN,K. The pipit was commonly seen in plowed fields and rice paddies, with good views at Motono and Arasaki. The prevalent subspecies in Japan is *japonicus*, which occasionally strays to western Alaska.

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

Meadow Bunting (*Emberiza cioides*) – HN,K. Handsome, chestnut colored bunting with bold dark face pattern, and willingness to perch in the open.

Rustic Bunting (*Emberiza rustica*) – HN,K; in brushy areas near Hitachi-Tone River and on Kyushu; appeared more crested than other buntings except Elegant.

Yellow-throated (Elegant) Bunting (*Emberiza elegans*) – HN; nice view of a male near the road at Ura-Myogi, with golden yellow throat, bold face pattern and tall crest

Black-faced Bunting (*Emberiza spodocephala*) – HN,K; seen daily on the two southern islands, offering many fine views such as on grassy edge of the trails through Kasai Seaside Park

Reed Bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) – HN,K; perched up in reeds, such as at Seaside Park

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

Brambling (*Fringilla montifringilla*) – HN. One perched just over the road in a small bare tree along the road at Ura-Myogi, while a flock worked the dense trees nearby.

Asian Rosy-Finch (*Leucosticte arctoa*) – HN; very lucky to see this alpine specialist, likely brought lower down to Ura-Myogi by heavy snowfall

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

Eurasian Siskin (*Spinus spinus*) – HN; two seen by feeder watchers at Karuizawa onsen lodge

Hawfinch (*Coccothraustes coccothraustes*) – HN,K, HK; seen best Kamisu City park

Japanese Grosbeak (*Eophona personata*) – HN; great views Karuizawa lodge feeders

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

Russet Sparrow (*Passer rutilans*) – K; flock at Arasaki

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

### **MAMMALS:**

Harbor Seal (*Phoca vitulina stegnegeri*) – seen on the Ochiishi boat trip

Sea Otter (*Enhydra lutris lutris*) – HK; the subspecies of Asian and Russian marine waters, seen on Ochiishi boat trip

Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes schrenki*) – HK; subspecies unique to Hokkaido

Japanese Marten (*Martes melampus*) – HN, HK; wonderful views of martens near feeder area at Yuyoda Daiichi resort

Japanese Weasel (*Mustela itatsi*) – HN; seen by Bob as it nearly ran under the tires of the bus

Sika [Deer] (*Cervus nippon*) – K, HK; deer with rather short, elk-like faces compared to North American deer; very numerous on Hokkaido

Japanese Squirrel (*Sciurus lis*) – HN; Tod saw one at Karuizawa feeders.

“Japanese” Red Squirrel (*Sciurus vulgaris orienti*) – HK; the tufted-eared squirrels on Hokkaido

### **HERPS:**

Giant Japanese Forest Toad/Japanese Common Toad (*Bufo japonicus*) – K; we saw a yellowish brown form of this Japanese endemic toad species along Kogawa Dam forest trail