

Japan Birding & Nature | Species Report

November 29 – December 15, 2023 | with Naturalist Journeys



Compiled by Bryan Shirley

Summary: We spent the first few days of our trip in southern Kyushu and were treated to nearly 15,000 Hooded and White-naped Cranes. The middle section of our trip was in central Honshu with thousands of wintering waterfowl, famous Japanese Gardens, Snow Monkeys, temples and castles. We ended our trip in the far north on the island of Hokkaido watching Red-crowned Cranes, eagles, and owls!

[Japan Birding & Nature with Naturalist Journeys November 29 - December 15, 2023 | eBird Trip Report](#)

Total Species: 134 Birds and 6 Mammals

DUCKS, GEESE AND SWANS: Anatidae — (26)

Greater White-fronted Goose *Anser albifrons* — (1) Several hundred were in the close end of the lake at Katano Wild Duck Pond.

Lesser White-fronted Goose *Anser erythropus* — (1) We were alerted to this rare migrant by a ranger at Katano Wild Duck Pond. We found it quickly and were able to watch it through the scope at close range. Short, pink bill and eye ring were obvious. Eventually it got lost in the hundreds of Greater White-fronted Geese and we couldn't relocate it.

Taiga Bean-Goose *Anser fabalis* — (2) A few were feeding in a rice field with all the cranes at Izumi. Lots more a couple of days later at Katano where we could compare bill and head shape with the next species.

Tundra Bean-Goose *Anser serrirostris* — (1) Lots mixed in with other ducks and geese at Katano. Nice to have Tundra and Taiga Bean Geese side by side for good comparison.

Mute Swan (I) *Cygnus olor* — (1) A pair of this introduced species in the moat at Matsumoto Castle.

Tundra Swan *Cygnus columbianus* — (3) Several hundred in the fields soon after we arrived in Komatsu. Also had them a few at Katano Wild Duck Pond and Mizumoto Park.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus* — (5) This was the common swan in Hokkaido, and we saw it most days there.

Mandarin Duck *Aix galericulata* — (1) We had about 40 birds at Kogawa Dam. Most were on the far side of the lake requiring the scope, but we had a few in the bay near us from the bridge.

Baikal Teal *Sibirionetta formosa* — (1) We had several hundred of this species at both Katano and Kahoku Lagoon, but typical for this species they were all quite distant and hard to see without scopes.

Northern Shoveler *Spatula clypeata* — (4) Fairly common in Kyushu and Honshu.

Gadwall *Mareca strepera* — (3) Not as common this trip as in most of North America and we only saw a few on the days we did see it.

Falcated Duck *Mareca falcata* — (2) A new favorite duck and voted best bird of the trip by some participants. Distant views at Katano and Kahoku, but much better looks at the pond we found along the road between Matsumoto and Karuizawa.

Eurasian Wigeon *Mareca penelope* — (8) One of the most common ducks of the trip.

Eastern Spot-billed Duck *Anas zonorhyncha* — (6) Common on Kyushu and Honshu. Voted bird of the trip by

Kay.

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos* — (7) Common on Kyushu and Honshu and a few looking cold in Hokkaido.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* — (7) Common throughout the trip. Fun to see a large flock eating grain at Mizumoto Park.

Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca* — (7) Common in the south but we didn't see any in Hokkaido. This is the Eurasian subspecies, distinguished by the horizontal white line instead of the vertical line typical of Green-winged Teal in North America.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* — (7) A common diving duck in the south and a few in Hokkaido as well. There were hundreds at Mizumoto Park.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula* — (8) Common in the south and less so in Hokkaido. Hundreds at Mizumoto Park.

Greater Scaup *Aythya marila* — (8) One of the most common ducks in Hokkaido. We saw several large flocks of more than a hundred birds.

Harlequin Duck *Histrionicus histrionicus* — (3) Voted bird of the trip by at least one participant. Common in the harbors and along the coast in Hokkaido.

Black Scoter *Melanitta americana* — (3) Common in Hokkaido and along the coast.

Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis* — (2) We had several mixed in with other sea ducks as we traveled along the coast from Yoroushi to Nemuro.

Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* — (4) Low numbers most days in Hokkaido.

Smew *Mergellus albellus* — (3) Bird of the trip for some participants. More females than males viewed quite close at the pond in Saku.

Common Merganser *Mergus merganser* — (5) Common in the south and a few in Hokkaido in the river at Shari.

Red-breasted Merganser *Mergus serrator* — (3) Common along the coast and in the harbors in Hokkaido.

PARTRIDGES, PHEASANTS, AND ALLIES: Phasianidae — (1)

Green Pheasant (E) *Phasianus versicolor* — (1) The national bird of Japan. One beautiful male viewed from the bus in a plowed field near Watarase.

GREBES: Podicipedidae — (5)

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* — (8) Low numbers seen in ponds and lakes most days.

Horned Grebe *Podiceps auritus* — (1) We were watching a Red-necked Grebe off the coast of Hokkaido and had one pop up into the scope.

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena* — (2) Common along the coast in Hokkaido and from all the hides as we scanned the ocean.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* — (7) Common in Kyushu and less so as we traveled north, but we did see one in Hokkaido as well.

Eared Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* — (2) A few at Kahoka Lagoon and more on the large lake at Tatara Marsh.

PIGEONS AND DOVES: Columbidae — (3)

Rock Pigeon (I) *Columba livia* — (12) Common everywhere and seen nearly every day.

Oriental Turtle-Dove *Streptopelia orientalis* — (10) Recorded daily on Kyushu and Honshu. Best looks as we walked back to the van along the sea wall at the Kuma River where several were feeding at eye level.

White-bellied Green-Pigeon *Treron sieboldii* — (1) One fly by while we were on the bridge at Kogawa Dam. Luckily it is green and easy to identify in flight! We also saw several making their interesting call from the forest around the lake.

RAILS, CRAKES, AND ALLIES: Rallidae — (1)

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* — (7) Common in Kyushu and Honshu in most lakes and rivers.

CRANES: Gruidae — (6)

Siberian Crane *Leucogeranus leucogeranus* — (1) It took us some time to locate it with all the other cranes, but eventually we found it in a flock of White-naped Cranes.

Sandhill Crane *Antigone canadensis* — (1) There were a few of the Lesser subspecies, which nests in Siberia.

White-naped Crane *Antigone vipio* — (2) Less numerous than the Hooded Cranes at Izumi, but much larger and more elegant in appearance – they were a favorite.

Common Crane *Grus grus* — (1) One feeding with the other cranes near the Visitor Center. Even with its distinct, black-patterned neck, it wasn't easy to find with so many other cranes, but eventually everyone got good looks in the scope.

Hooded Crane *Grus monacha* — (2) What a great experience seeing thousands of Hooded (and White-Naped) Cranes at sunrise and then feeding and flying everywhere around Izumi. One of the highlights of the trip.

Red-crowned Crane *Grus japonensis* — (4) Largest flock was close to 50 birds at Tsurumidai. The lack of snow and abundant open water meant the cranes were spread out – we saw them daily in Hokkaido, not just around Tsurui.

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS: Charadriidae — (5)

Black-bellied Plover *Pluvialis squatarola* — (1) Several on the mudflat at Yatsushiro.

Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus* — (2) A few flocks at Izumi in the same fields as the cranes, and more in the Komatsu area.

Gray-headed Lapwing *Vanellus cinereus* — (1) Good numbers on our first day in Komatsu. This species is mostly in Western Honshu and just makes it as far north/east as Komatsu.

Long-billed Plover *Charadrius placidus* — (1) One on the river near our hotel in Izumi after visiting the Samurai houses.

Little Ringed Plover *Charadrius dubius* — (1) A fair number were scattered around on the mudflat at Yatsushiro.

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES: Scolopacidae — (6)

Dunlin *Calidris alpina* — (2) Close looks at a flock near the mouth of the river in Izumi, and common on the mudflat at Yatsushiro.

Solitary Snipe *Gallinago solitaria* — (1) One magically appeared on the river at Yoroushi during breakfast our first morning. This species is not easy to see throughout its range!

Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* — (1) One in the ditch next to the road at Izumi.

Common Sandpiper *Actitis hypoleucos* — (4) Seen in a variety of habitats, always single birds. It bobs and flies just like its American counterpart, the Spotted Sandpiper.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* — (1) Only one during the trip on the mudflat at Yatsushiro.

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus* — (1) Mostly a common migrant in fall, a late pair was hanging out with all the other shorebirds at Yatsushiro.

AUKS, MURRES, AND PUFFINS: Alcidae — (1)

Spectacled Guillemot *Cephus carbo* — (1) Brief and distant views in the waves and wind at Cape Nossappu as we scanned the ocean from behind the lighthouse.

GULLS AND TERNS: Laridae — (8)

Saunders's Gull *Saundersilarus saundersi* — (1) Our main target for the trip up to Yatsushiro, this gull winters in western Japan and along the South China Sea. We had good looks and were able to compare the stubby black

bill with the bill of the following species.

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus* — (7) Good sized flocks throughout the trip on all three islands.

Black-tailed Gull *Larus crassirostris* — (4) We had our first sighting at the Tama River on our first morning and small groups in Kyushu and Honshu.

Common Gull *Larus canus* — (5) Split from Mew Gull (now Short-billed in North America). The Kamchatka subspecies is found in Japan and our first was in a field near the hotel in Komatsu. Seen daily around the coast in Hokkaido.

Herring Gull *Larus argentatus* — (5) Split by some taxonomists as Vega Gull. Low numbers on all three islands during our trip.

Slaty-backed Gull *Larus schistisagus* — (4) The most common gull in Hokkaido, their black backs made them easy to pick out.

Glaucous-winged Gull *Larus glaucescens* — (3) Fairly common in harbors and along the coast in Hokkaido. Gray back with gray wingtips.

Glaucous Gull *Larus hyperboreus* — (3) Fairly common in Hokkaido along the coast. Light back with white wingtips.

CORMORANTS: Phalacrocoracidae — (4)

Red-faced Cormorant *Urile urile* — (1) One was viewed at the cormorant roost on Cape Nosappu, but unfortunately it jumped off the rock and disappeared in the surf while everyone was getting out of the vehicle.

Pelagic Cormorant *Urile pelagicus* — (5) A few were seen on the seawall at Cape Amagozen on the Sea of Japan, but not seen again until Hokkaido where it was very common.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo* — (6) Common around Honshu and Kyushu.

Japanese Cormorant *Phalacrocorax capillatus* — (3) Difficult to distinguish from Great Cormorant, we saw one in a flock of Great Cormorants in Kyushu. There were several seen well at Cape Amagozen, and another pair riding out the wind inside the harbor at Shari, Hokkaido. Identified from the previous species by location and the large amount of white in the cheek.

HERONS AND EGRETS: Ardeidae — (3)

Gray Heron *Ardea cinerea* — (7) The Eurasian counterpart of Great Blue Heron. Common everywhere except Hokkaido.

Great Egret *Ardea alba* — (7) Common in Kyushu and in the right habitat in Honshu.

Little Egret *Egretta garzetta* — (5) Common in Kyushu and a few around Honshu as well. Looks like a Snowy Egret with dark legs and yellow feet.

IBISES AND SPOONBILLS: Threskiornithidae — (2)

Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* — (2) Several viewed in a field in Kyushu and on the mudflat at Yatsushiro. Both times we saw it with the next species allowing for great comparison.

Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor* — (2) Endangered species found in SE Asia. Very low numbers in Japan, often in flocks of wintering Eurasian Spoonbills.

OSPREY: Pandionidae — (1)

Osprey *Pandion haliaetus* — (4) We recorded this species most days in Kyushu and especially at Yatsushiro. We also saw one at Tarara Marsh on Honshu.

HAWKS, KITES, AND EAGLES: Accipitridae — (6)

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* — (1) A sparrowhawk scattered the mixed flock of tits we were watching.

Eurasian Goshawk *Accipiter gentilis* — (3) Recently split from Northern Goshawk (now American). Best looks were at Tatara Marsh where we saw an adult perched looking over the ducks.

Black Kite *Milvus migrans* — (13) Abundant and seen daily, often in large numbers. Japan has the “Black-eared” race.

White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* — (5) Low numbers seen daily in Hokkaido.

Steller’s Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus* — (4) What a great bird! We saw it almost daily in Hokkaido. Mostly soaring but one perched on a telephone pole near Nemuro.

Eastern Buzzard *Buteo japonicus* — (8) A common hawk in Japan in the winter, we saw one on our first day driving from Kagoshima to Izumi.

OWLS: Strigidae — (2)

Blakiston’s Fish-Owl *Ketupa blakistoni* — (1) Bird of the trip for many of us. It didn’t appear at Yoroushi until 3:30 AM the first night and was only viewed by one of us. The next night we were luckier as it was there ready to eat at 5:30! We watched it for about 15 minutes in the tree across the river before it flew in and caught a fish!

Ural Owl *Strix uralensis* — (1) Another great bird! Found in a well-known roost spot in the afternoon on our first day in Hokkaido.

KINGFISHERS: Alcedinidae — (2)

Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis* — (3) First near the waterfall at the river in Izumi after we visited the samurai houses. One more in a small river in Komatsu and we had a third sighting in the moat at Matsumoto Castle.

Crested Kingfisher *Megaceryle lugubris* — (1) Flew across the lake and landed by us when we were getting ready to leave Kogawa Dam in Kyushu.

WOODPECKERS: Picidae — (4)

Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker *Yungipicus kizuki* — (7) A tiny woodpecker recorded mostly in mixed flocks. Its buzzy call usually alerted us to its presence before we saw it.

White-backed Woodpecker *Dendrocopos leucotos* — (2) One was seen by part of the group at Otowa Bridge at sunrise. Another was found with the following species at the beginning of our walk at Shunkunitai in Hokkaido.

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major* — (7) Common throughout the trip, but our best looks were at the bird feeders at Yoroushi where we could see them only a few feet away.

Japanese Woodpecker *Picus awokera* — (3) Heard at Kogawa Dam but we couldn’t find it. We had a brief glimpse at Jigokudani, but finally had really good looks for everyone at the Karuizawa Wild Bird Forest.

FALCONS AND CARACARAS: Falconidae — (1)

Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* — (1) Brief views from the bridge at Kogawa Dam before it disappeared behind the ridge.

SHRIKES: Laniidae — (1)

Bull-headed Shrike *Lanius bucephalus* — (6) First seen in the small park where we had lunch at Yatsushiro. Several more throughout the Honshu section of the trip.

CROWS AND JAYS: Corvidae — (6)

Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* — (6) We saw a few at Jigokudani during our hike to see the monkeys and a few more at Karuizawa. These would be the *japonicus* subspecies. Later we saw the orange “Brant’s” subspecies in Hokkaido at the feeders at Yoroushi.

Azure-winged Magpie *Cyanopica cyanus* — (1) A nice flock was outside the hide at Kahoku in Kanazawa.

Daurian Jackdaw *Corvus dauuricus* — (2) Typically found in low numbers mixed in with Rooks in Kyushu near the Visitor Center while watching cranes.

Rook *Corvus frugilegus* — (3) Thousands daily around Izumi in huge flocks.

Carrion Crow *Corvus corone* — (15) Very common and recorded daily.

Large-billed Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos* — (15) Very common and recorded daily.

TITS AND CHICKADEES: Paridae — (5)

Coal Tit *Pariparus ater* — (4) Not as common as the other tits, there was usually one or two in a mixed flock with other tits. Recorded at Jigokudani, Karuizawa, and coming to the feeders at Yoroushi.

Varied Tit *Sittiparus varius* — (7) Beautiful bird! Seen most days in Kyushu and Honshu.

Marsh Tit *Poecile palustris* — (5) In Japan found only in Hokkaido where we recorded it every day.

Willow Tit *Poecile montanus* — (2) Very similar to previous species, but Marsh is not on Honshu. We saw Willows at a few places around Nagano.

Japanese Tit *Parus minor* — (10) Most common Tit and seen most days.

SWALLOWS AND MARTINS: Hirundinidae — (1)

Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica* — (1) Only recorded on our first day near the river we stopped to bird at during our drive to Izumi from the airport in Kagoshima.

BULBULS: Pycnonotidae — (1)

Brown-eared Bulbul *Hypsipetes amaurotis* — (15) Very common and recorded every day of the trip.

BUSH WARBLERS: Scotocercidae — (1)

Japanese Bush Warbler *Horornis diphone* — (1) Our only “heard only” of the trip, two were in the thick bamboo near the blind at Kahoku Marsh, but never came into the open.

LONG-TAILED TITS: Aegithalidae — (1)

Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus* — (5) Several flocks on Honshu, mostly around Karuizawa area. In Hokkaido the white-headed subspecies (“Snow Fairy”) was trickier, but eventually we found it near the hide at the Nemuro Citizens Forest, but not by the whole group.

WHITE-EYES: Zosteropidae — (1)

Warbling White-eye *Zosterops japonicus* — (4) We saw our first flock at Kogawa Dam in Kyushu, then we recorded them at several other locations on Honshu.

KINGLETS: Regulidae — (1)

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* — (2) Mixed in a small flock of birds on our walk in the forest at Shunkunitai, and a pair was found in the forest at the Nemuro Citizens Forest.

NUTHATCHES: Sittidae — (1)

Eurasian Nuthatch *Sitta europaea* — (6) Common everywhere there was a bird feeder! Very common at Yoroushi and **the hide in Nemuro.**

TREECREEPERS: Certhiidae — (1)

Eurasian Treecreeper *Certhia familiaris* — (2) One landed on a tree and started climbing only a few feet away

from us at Jigokudani. One other in Hokkaido at Shukunitai.

WRENS: Troglodytidae — (1)

Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* — (1) One popped up near the small creek we hiked along at the Karuizawa Wild Bird Forest.

DIPPERS: Cinclidae — (1)

Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasii* — (3) Brief views of one in the river in Karuizawa, but much better looks a few days later at Yoroushi. One was in the river during our breakfast both mornings.

STARLINGS AND MYNAS: Sturnidae — (2)

European Starling *Sturnus vulgaris* — (1) A flock was in a rice field while we were watching the cranes in Izumi. This area is normally the only place in Japan to record this species.

White-cheeked Starling *Spodiopsar cineraceus* — (10) The common starling in Japan, abundant on Kyushu and Honshu and forms large flocks this time of year.

THRUSHES: Turdidae — (2)

Pale Thrush *Turdus pallidus* — (1) Surprisingly scarce this trip – only recorded once in the shady forest at Kogawa Dam.

Dusky Thrush *Turdus eunomus* — (8) A common winter thrush in Japan. Good numbers on all three islands, including a flock of 40+ birds in Hokkaido.

Feildfare *Turdus pilaris* — (1) Very rare winter visitor to Japan. We had two in the large flock of Dusky Thrush in Hokkaido.

OLD WORLD FLYCATCHERS: Muscicapidae — (3)

Red-flanked Bluetail *Tarsiger cyanurus* — (2) One bird on the optional afternoon hike at Karuizawa. One other at Mizumoto Park when we returned to Tokyo.

Daurian Redstart *Phoenicurus aureus* — (3) Great looks our first morning in Tokyo and a couple of other times during the trip.

Blue Rock-Thrush *Monticola solitarius* — (2) Best look was the first morning in Tokyo during the walk along the Tama River. In Japan we have the *phillipensis* subspecies with the red belly.

OLD WORLD SPARROWS: Passeridae — (2)

Russet Sparrow *Passer cinnamomeus* — (2) Large flocks around Izumi in Kyushu. Redder than the following species.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus* — (15) Very common around cities and villages. We saw this species every day.

WAGTAILS AND PIPITS: Motacillidae — (4)

Gray Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* — (2) Two seen on our first evening when we stopped to bird near the river on our way to Izumi. Several comments on “why is it called Gray and not Yellow?”

Japanese Wagtail *Motacilla grandis* — (5) It has a black head with just a white eyebrow, separating this near endemic form the following species. Seen multiple times on all three islands.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* — (7) Common. Lots of variation, but never as much black as previous species.

American Pipit *Anthus rubescens* — (2) A couple in rice fields near Yatsushiro, but better looks when we had a flock on the grass at Mizumoto Park. The Japan subspecies.

FINCHES AND EUPHONIAS: Fringillidae — (6)

Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla* — (3) A large flock in the beautiful Kenrokuen Gardens in Kanazawa. Also a small flock in Karuizawa and Mizumoto Park.

Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes* — (4) A small flock in the park we visited after seeing the snow monkeys. We had other sightings as well, including a flock near Shunkunitai on Hokkaido.

Japanese Grosbeak *Eophona personata* — (1) We were fortunate to find a small flock in the trees outside of Matsumoto Castle.

Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula* — (1) Seen only by a couple members of our group at Ito Sanctuary while the rest of us were in the gift shop!

Asian Rosy-Finch *Leucosticte arctoa* — (1) Tough viewing conditions with blowing snow and foggy windows, but we found a flock of about 20 birds on some dirt hills on the Notsuke Peninsula.

Oriental Greenfinch *Chloris sinica* — (7) Not as common as some years, but still seen most days.

OLD WORLD BUNTINGS: Emberizidae — (4)

Meadow Bunting *Emberiza cioides* — (4) Good looks in the scope at one from the bridge near Kogawa Dam.

Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus* — (1) The rain prevented us from seeing them around Izumi, so we were happy to see them in the reeds at Tarara Marsh on Honshu.

Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica* — (2) One at the pond we stopped at after the castle (with all the Falcated Ducks). Better looks around Karuizawa.

Masked Bunting *Emberiza personata* — (1) One seen near the road just above Katano Duck Sanctuary.

MAMMALS: — (7)

Red Squirrel *Sciurus vulgaris* — (2) Beautiful long-eared squirrel that visited the feeder both days at Yoroushi.

Japanese Squirrel *Sciurus lis* — (1) Probably this species, it ran across the road in front of the bus in Karuizawa.

Japanese Marten *Martes melampus* — (2) Frequently raiding the fish feeder at Yoroushi Onsen.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* — (3) Recorded most days on Hokkaido.

Spotted Seal *Phoca largha* — (1) One floating off the point near the hide at Hanasaki.

Japanese Macaque *Macaca fuscata* — (1) Dozens at the monkey park in Jigokudani including several bathing in the hot springs.

Sika Deer *Cervus nippon* — (5) Abundant on Hokkaido. We had a large herd during our walk at Shunkunitai.