

Japan Birding & Nature | Jan. 9 – 23, 2023

Trip Report | by Peg Abbott



Guides Bryan Shirley and Takumi Koichi, with Peg Abbott of Naturalist Journeys and 12 participants: Giny, Bud, Rob, Cathy, Debbie, Nancy, Peter, Katy, John, Kathy, Mike, and Shirli



Early Arrivals

Several of our group arrived early to take in some of the museums and sights of Tokyo. Others came in today, and rested up a bit after the flight. They found Tokyo very easy to get around and had a grand time at various museums, temples and green space parks. For many the Brown-eared Bulbul was the first bird sighted.

Mon., Jan. 9

Honshu: Arrival in Tokyo

The rest of the group arrived via Haneda Airport on various flights during the day. As our welcome dinner was close to the hotel, we walked, which was fun after the long time on our planes. Bryan described our restaurant as one of his favorites, a “a hole in the wall” about five minutes away. It proved to be delightful. We enjoyed



lively conversation along with luscious pot stickers, cashew chicken, veggies and a tomato-egg concoction for the vegetarians, and several of the group tried Saki or the local beer. Nancy and Pete were our last to arrive, but quickly joined into the fun.

Tues., Jan. 10 Honshu to Kyushu: Tama River in Tokyo | Fukuoka | Izumi

We wanted to explore a bit this morning from the hotel before our flight to Kyushu. Bryan led us through the narrow streets over to the Tama River where we saw a surprising number of species. The light was good and we could pick out Tufted Duck, Great Crested Grebe, Eurasian Wigeon and Common Pochard. Black-headed and Vega (Herring) Gulls flew about, along with Great Cormorants. We walked on a sea wall with views of a modern bridge and behind it, a clear view of Mt. Fuji in all its snowy glory. How lucky we were for this sun-bright day! Blue Rock Thrushes were surprisingly confiding, along with White-cheeked Starlings and Brown-eared Bulbuls. Off to a great start!

Walking back, we stopped at a charming, small temple that had been quite active with New Year's festivals and still had small monuments with decorations. Fox statues adorned the pillars and gardens, tied in bright red, flowing scarves. Some of the buildings in the temple complex were quite old, others modern, showing long use of the site for worship. A natural spring flowed at the entrance, a place to wash one's hands before entering. We had a late-morning flight so on return we packed up and headed to the airport. It was a short flight south to Fukuoka on the north end of the islands. Upon landing, we would drive down the length of the island to Izumi with our exceptional driver, Koichi. After the pandemic, buses were not as easy to find or use as one-way rentals, thus we booked our flight in and out of this location. We did enjoy the comfort and room of our Toyota Coaster, so it was worth a bit more time. The drive was along a valley that was densely inhabited, a mix of villages and farms that contained agricultural fields and greenhouses used to grow strawberries, tomatoes and other foods. We enjoyed snack shopping at our rest stop and arrived about dusk. The Izumi hotel had a poster with a lot of information about the local cranes, whetting our appetites for the next day's birding. We walked to dinner at Takenoko, which felt good again after a travel day. Bryan pre-ordered a meal for us to keep it short and we enjoyed tempura shrimp, a Salisbury steak and veggies. We did our bird checklist in the lobby and headed off to rest.



Wed., Jan. 11

Kyushu: Arasaki (Izumi) Crane Center | Lunch at a Sake Factory | Kogawa Reservoir | Kogawa River

We had an early breakfast, served as a buffet at the Wings Hotel. It had a mix of Japanese and western breakfast choices, and most of us sampled from both. Miso soup, curried rice, green beans, fresh cabbage and greens, eggs, yoghurt, tea and coffee. By 7AM we were ready to depart for the Crane Visitor Center. Even before we arrived, we were seeing cranes flying overhead in large groups, and a good number feeding in the fields. Koichi shared the results of a recent survey, letting us know that so far this year, numbers were a bit lower than normal, with some concern about avian flu as at least 1,000 cranes had been found dead in the field. Management was feeding the cranes in a way to spread them out, and we noticed all the workers feeding the cranes were dressed in protective gear. There were still loads of birds! The latest (this week) survey had noted 7,800 Hooded Cranes, 2,800 White-naped Cranes, four Common Cranes, three Sandhill Cranes and two very rare Siberian Cranes. It's difficult to describe how moving the scene was as we emerged ourselves in the sounds and behaviors of so many cranes! Observing how they moved, and at times flew, was overwhelming, and one could sense of morning urgency to feed, and at times hear the trumpeting of unison calling between pairs.

Our perch was on a rooftop observation deck and today it wasn't crowded, just our group and a few mostly Japanese photographers. We spent time on the rooftop and on the ground, as photography and scanning were different from each level. Scanning we found other highlights: two species of spoonbill (Eurasian and Black-faced), many gleaming Common Shelducks, patterned Eastern Spot-billed Ducks and more. Competing for our attention were huge numbers of Rooks, among which keen-eyed Bryan spotted two Daurian Crows in full view on phone wires. In the fields we found Skylark, Meadow Bunting, Bullhead Shrike and, at a nearby farm with tree plantings, Oriental Greenfinch. It was hard to tear ourselves away, but we left mid-morning to view nearby fields and a small pond, where we found a female Smew. Three men were fishing there, sitting cross-legged under large umbrellas on the edge of the water. Following the exploration, we went to lunch to feast on Soba noodles wonderfully prepared and ready for us at the Izumi Saki factory. We tasted several types of Saki and Bud steered us quickly to #3. They gave us all a sample bottle to take home as well!



In the afternoon we had a great outing, driving into the mountains to a jade-toned lake created by Kogawa Dam. We walked in the fresh air, immersed in nature and watching hundreds of Mandarin ducks! We had hoped to find a few, but here we were watching 10 or more at a time in the scope with males and females basking on shore and big groups in fight. Lovely deciduous trees held a small flock in which we found our first Varied Tit. Returning to lower elevation, we made a stop at a river to search for Long-billed Plover, which likes the streamside gravel bars. We looked for some time when Peg called out that she had two quite a long way away. As we walked to enjoy scope views, we had the double treat of seeing a gorgeous Common Kingfisher, first of the trip. In the morning we'd missed the rarest of the five crane species known to be present, so we returned on a tip from the ranger. We returned to the Izumi Crane Center and climbed back up to scan from the rooftop, but despite a lot of searching, we didn't find it. Instead we took in a lovely sunset as winter cold settled in. For dinner we drove to a place Koichi and Bryan both liked, and here we cooked dinner at a center grill on each of our tables with mixed veggies, chicken, meat or seafood that we grilled at our tables. "Meating" was an appropriate name for the restaurant, but even our vegetarians found nice fresh food to cook.

Thurs., Jan. 12

Kyushu: Arasaki | Izumi Crane Center | Manyo Park | Kuma River | Suizenji Park | Shimozu Lake

The wildlife guard at the Izumi Crane Center told us that a Siberian Crane (endangered) had been coming to roost in the flooded field that we could see at a distance from the viewing tower. But it came late, almost at dusk and left soon after dawn. Such a global rarity, we had to try! We made it optional as a pre-breakfast birding run and left so early we actually had time to drive to a nearby dike road where we had seen a big dung mound of a Raccoon Dog, a Japanese canid, but no luck spotting this one. Almost all the group had elected to join the early outing and we were rewarded, first with good scope views of this huge, white Siberian Crane standing regally taller than the Hooded Cranes it was packed in with. We got scopes on it for good long views. Being there early was special as the dawn light and sounds were incredible – skeins and skeins of cranes poured in from the mountains to the east. As the light got stronger, the feeding truck made a loop around fields and the birds responded quickly.



The workers were clad in hazard gear, taking no chances in this year of avian flu. All this activity was nice for us as the birds were moving around, creating great flight shots for our photographers. Deb had specifically wanted to practice these – what an opportunity! At the back of the pond, we watched as the Siberian Crane flew off to feed. All these thousands of cranes breed to the north in Russia and Mongolia, and by late February they'll leave to work their way up the Korean Peninsula. The DMZ between the two Koreas is a major resting stop. Asian wildlife wintering in Japan has to thread its way through dense populations and testy borders, making the scene we were witnessing all the more incredible. We pulled ourselves away to walk a reed-lined canal, finding three species of buntings and a lovely Daurian Redstart. We were hoping to find Penduline Tits, but they were not present this day. It was lunch time. Locals enjoyed watching our flock forage for our picnic lunch at a roadside deli with a fantastic collection of foods. We had to ask Bryan to interpret all the labels or just choose one based on the picture. It was great fun and we then took our treats out to the Kuma River estuary where we ate and then walked to admire big rafts of ducks, Northern Pintail and Shelduck. Osprey flew overhead and Bud got a photo of one with a fish. The highlight here was finding a half-dozen Saunders's Gulls scattered through them, a range-restricted species that was a good find.

We drove north for an hour or so, then stopped at a city park with numerous fruiting trees and walked right into a flock of Long-tailed Tits mingling with a Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, Oriental Greenfinch and Warbling White-eye. There were some great photo opportunities, and it was hard to move on to the lake where we scanned for Baikal Teal and other ducks. We worked our way around the lake, and at the far edge a hide let us get very close to a number of species. A Great-crested Grebe put on a good show, which Katy and Peg captured on video, and we had good views at numerous duck species. We checked into our hotel for the night, a one-night stay to be in position to get to the waterfowl areas the following morning. We arrived in time to do a loop



walk up the hill to see Kumamoto Castle that had been partly destroyed during a 2016 earthquake but was still very impressive. A stern warrior statue showed details of military clothing of the day. We got the best views atop the hill of the tall towers of the castle, and walking down saw the reconstruction effort in progress, with many numbered stones in place to rebuild the massive walls.

This was the night for sushi, and the gang had fun going to a restaurant where various dishes came by the tables on a conveyer belt. You could sample from dishes as they passed the tables on one side or put in an order which would arrive on the other. Once finished, we stacked our plates in a cylinder that carried dishes and waste away after they were counted for the bill. One of our tables did splendidly, sampling quite a lot and were billed as a “forty-plate” dinner, which became a joke for the rest of the trip.

Fri., Jan. 13 **Kyushu to Honshu: Ramsar Wetland Site at Higashi
Mudflats | Ariaki Bay | Yoka, Saga | Flight to Komatsu**

Today was primarily a travel day, but we made a stop to scope shorebirds at the Ramsar wetland site at Higashi Yoka mudflats. The tide was out so birds were seen at a distance, but we kept at it and in time had identified Eurasian Curlew, Grey Heron, Black-bellied Plover, hundreds of Dunlin, Red-necked Stints and a lone Common Redshank. Saunders’s Gulls were plentiful here. We walked along a seawall and then dropped down to a coastal flat which gave us somewhat better views. In time Koichi came to get us, reminding us we had a plane to catch. Time always flies by when birding! We had to hustle, but we were pretty good by now at checking in for our ANA flight from Kyushu to Komatsu. Weather was moving in, making the flight bumpy. Winter days are short, so there wasn’t time for birding this afternoon. Dinner was at the hotel, an easy night that also gave us a chance to catch up on our bird list.



Sat., Jan. 14

Honshu: Amagozen Lookout Point | Kamoike Waterfowl Sanctuary | Joyful Lunch | Kohokugata Hide

This morning we went to the waterfowl sanctuary that we enjoyed very much. There was a delightful ranger on duty who helped us find various species, introducing a wonderful technology using a video camera on a television feed. When we'd find Baikal Teal or Falcated Duck or a perched Eurasian Marsh Harrier, the ranger would swoop in to get the camera on it, and then we could review details on the screen. Most of the Baikal Teal were at the back of the pond, but this winter he estimated 1,400 were there, and in time we all enjoyed good scope views. We watched our time as we had a 3PM train to catch, exciting for us as this was the famous Bullet Train known to travel at 180 miles an hour. In just about an hour we'd be in Nagano, which would have taken us four hours to drive. Koichi returned the bus, flew to Tokyo and got us a new bus for the rest of our time on Honshu. The logistics went seamlessly as arrived (quickly!) with no mishaps, and with all our luggage.

Our hotel in Nagano was a short walk from the train station. Once settled, we had one of the best meals of our trip and a memorable time dining. Dinner was at Kattsun, a restaurant Koichi knew that offered to open just for us as they normally close on weekends. They are famous for Okonomiyaki, Japanese pancakes, that they've perfected over the course of 22 years. We started with local beers, lemon sours or Sake, the latter overpoured into little bento boxes, enough that the second glass was there waiting for you. The batter was stirred and poured on grills in the center of each table, with the servers making them round and just the right thickness. After they flipped them, they put on a delicious sauce and then decorated them with mayonnaise, adding powdered seaweed or fish flakes if desired. They were delicious! We were stuffed when they announced their other specialty, Yaki Soba, a fried noodle dish. Gingy smiled and encouraged us to have fortitude and try it – oh so good! Our strong ones filled their plates. We enjoyed seeing the lights of the city as we walked back to fall into our very comfortable beds!



Sun., Jan. 15

Honshu: Jigokudani Monkey Park | Zenkoji Temple | Nagano | Karuizawa Mountain Resort Area

Today was our day to visit the Snow Monkey Park, something we all looked forward to, inspired many years ago by the iconic images published in National Geographic. We drove north from Nagano for about an hour, watching the landscape become more wintery as we gained elevation, and there was snow in the parking lot as we assembled. Here we put on our Yak Trax that gave us a more secure grip on the icy path. It was a good mile into the site, through some beautiful woods of tall conifers. The ground was peppered with still-green ferns and club mosses, lots of needles and some Japanese maple leaves. Signage told us about Serow (a hooved mammal we did not see) and the monkeys, a bit of history of the area. This is the only population of the endemic Japanese Macaque that has the unique habit of bathing in the hot springs. It dates to the 1960's when an alpha female of a troop near the resort adjacent to this park gave it a try. Soon her clan all adopted the behavior, enjoying the pools as a central part of their day. The park is part of the city's watershed, and hot mineral water is piped underground to the local baths. They made the monkeys their own pool and to this day they delight tourists like us. There was snow around the pool but not a lot, and it was warm enough that we saw steam but not frosty faces. But we were captivated by those expressive faces! This species has very pink skin and such engaging eyes, and we enjoyed the antics between the youngsters, and watching them feed on bark, roots or whatever they could find, including some rice scattered about to keep them interested in the site. We spent several hours there photographing them and, in the woods nearby, seeing Eurasian Jays, Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker and both Varied and Japanese Tits in a flock. John led the way to some homemade apple pie served with hot coffee that hit the spot on a cold day!



Then we shed our Yak Trax and headed to lunch, a speedy local chain restaurant that had a variety of noodle and rice dishes with a selection of vegetables and meats, and for our travelers with a sweet tooth, ice cream sundaes! Needing to walk off our big lunch, a stroll in the gardens of the Zen Koji Temple in Nagano was most welcomed. This is a temple complex with many buildings, shrines, sculptures and signs with beautiful characters. We wandered about taking it all in, and our birders were happy to find a Japanese Green Woodpecker here, first spotted by Peter, mixed in with Brown-eared Bulbul and Tree Sparrows. From here we drove into the mountains and our beautiful, spacious lodgings in a rural part of Karuizawa. Our rooms were gorgeous, with multiple rooms, plenty of storage, well-lit and heated to cozy comfort. We were all happy to land knowing we had three nights to enjoy these luxurious accommodations. It was snowing lightly as we walked to dinner in a large glassed-in room. It had a lovely ambiance as lighting on the deciduous trees showed off their shapeliness and grace. Dinner was several courses with fresh greens, a lovely light fish, some incredible tender beef and lots of vegetables. Dessert was a fruit mousse. Afterwards we caught up on our bird list and soon headed for bed and a few enjoyed a soak in the Onsen.

Mon., Jan 16 Honshu: Raikotera Reservoir | Matsumoto Castle | Matsumoto Alps City Park

We decided to switch up the itinerary to match the weather, which this morning was moody -- wintery with fog and mist and quite gray. We had breakfast in the lovely glass dining room, then headed north to go the Matsumoto Castle, one of the three prettiest and most significant in Japan. On the way up we stopped at Raikotera Reservoir, where a brisk wind kept the viewing short. We saw many of the ducks we'd seen before and particularly enjoyed four male and one female Smew at the far end. The mountains covered in snow-capped conifers framed our view. We walked the grounds of the castle and most of the group climbed the steep stairs to view the inside of the Great Keep and towers of this historic structure. There were guns and weapons on display to tell the story of this fortress, and the floor was made of wooden planks from massive trees laid down in the 1500's, not likely anything that could be built today. We watched several duck species in the moat including an introduced Mute Swan, and Nancy spied a Common Kingfisher that perched for quite some time. Lunch was at a Japanese Curry restaurant that was quite good, and very efficient, serving delicious, hot steamy food. Bryan and Koichi tempted us by running across the street to Mr. Donut afterwards, bringing boxes of sweets to the bus for



dessert. Our afternoon birding was at a wonderful park with extensive trails and lovely deciduous woodlands dotted with tall stately Sugi, a native cypress. We had a Hawfinch right off the bat teed up on a conifer, then a good look at a Eurasian Buzzard in flight. Several had a quick look at Great Spotted Woodpecker, and we ventured across the bridge to look for several species and finding a flock of Bramblings feeding below us on a hillside. A huge flock of Oriental Greenfinch posed in stately branches, giving us beautiful views. Coming back down to the parking lot, persistent Peg was checking on the reported White's Thrush location when she spied the species that we'd climbed the hill to see, but missed, on a shrubby hillside just below the parking area – Long-tailed Rosefinch. A male and female were most cooperative, flying into view once the group came over, landing atop a hedgerow and staying in view as we changed our angle several times. Nice! We thought it was time to go, but then we intercepted three Japanese birders who sent us back to the woods with their report of a Red-flanked Bluetail and a second thrush spot. Sigh, this earned us our 10,000 steps for the day, and some nice views, but it was too late and we didn't find our hoped for species. We got back after dark, though in winter that is about 6PM, after a long but fulfilling day! Dinner was at the hotel.

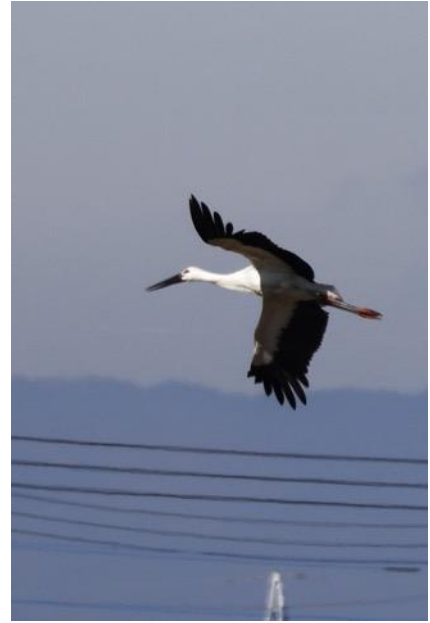
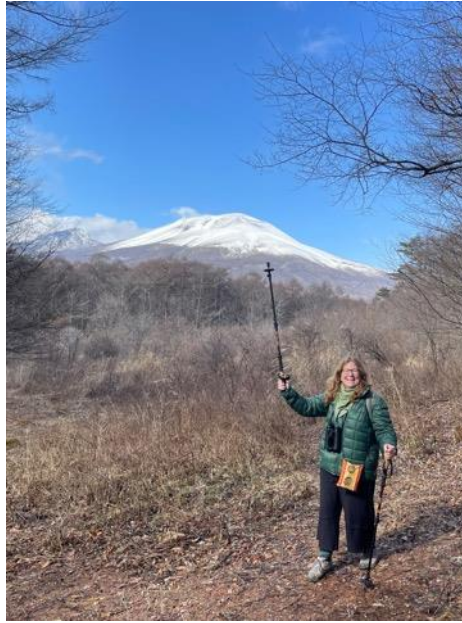
Tues., Jan 17 Honshu: Karuizawa Bird Forest | Views of Mt. Asama | Nagakura Temple | Kumoba Pond | Onsen Soak

We woke to bright sun, and temperatures of 17F. Walking to breakfast a Great Spotted Woodpecker put on a good show. The view from the dining room was so welcoming, with floor-to-ceiling windows and tall, graceful deciduous trees framing a ravine. A few of the group had greeted dawn in the Onsen, a great hot soak and sauna to start the day. The plan was to spend the day in the forest where there were a number of species we really wanted to see. We went straight to Karuizawa Wild Bird Forest Park, not far from the hotel, and had several



trails to choose from. We parked by a rushing river and scanned for Brown Dipper before heading up the hill. Shortly up the hill a Eurasian Wren dove into a culvert, then emerged to sing and put on a good show. Further up the trail, three of our group looped uphill to scout for possible Copper Pheasant, but instead discovered a big mixed flock at a secluded feeding station. They returned to get us and we found Varied, Marsh and Japanese Tits, Eurasian Nuthatch and a pair of Great Spotted Woodpeckers. We heard a Japanese Grosbeak uttering its lovely musical call further up, but we weren't able to see it. Making a loop back on a wooded trail, still on the hunt for the pheasant (unsuccessful), we had good looks at Long-tailed Rosefinches in thick shrubbery. The view of Mt. Asama was spectacular, and we enjoyed Koichi's description of climbing it on his guided outings that he offers when not birding with Bryan.

Returning to the bus, Peg heard a familiar call, and we all scanned the trees to find Treecreeper, an Old World equivalent to our Brown Creeper. It flew tree to tree feeding in the bark crevices just as predicted. We tried again for the Brown Dipper by the bridge, and as we were scanning the rocks downstream, Deb said, "its right here!" Indeed, just below us on the rocks, this well-insulated dipper was bobbing and diving into the water, only to hop back up on a rock and sing. We watched it make its way downstream, repeatedly diving to feed on invertebrates. Peg moved down ahead of it and got some great video of it at close range, a real treat as this completed the family for her, being the fifth of five dipper species in the world. Call to celebrate! We choose our lunch at a local grocery, buying way too much food as it was such fun. We hit the sushi bar, deli counter, cookie row and specialty chocolates. It was such a nice day that some of the group ate outside when we got back to the hotel, others enjoyed a break back in their cozy rooms. The afternoon outing was short, we left about 3:15PM to walk to a nearby shrine, then visited another with a small lake. We chose the spot as tall trees held big clumps of mistletoe, often a magnet for grosbeaks and waxwings. We found two species of woodpecker working the same tree, Great Spotted and Japanese Green. Brown-eared Bulbul whined and posed in the sun.



From there we drove about five minutes to Kumoba Pond and did another short walk. It was getting cold in the late afternoon, and small birds were pretty quiet, but we had a few ducks on the lake -- similar to others we'd seen but nice and close, which made our photographers happy. We returned with time to try the Onsen and sauna, a lovely way to relax at day's end. Then we enjoyed another filling and elegant dinner in the lovely dining room.

Wed., Jan 18

Honshu: Tatara Park | Oriental Stork

We descended from the mountains after breakfast, coming down into one of the largest valleys in Japan, where the capital is located. We drove for about an hour-and-a-half towards Tokyo, then veered off our course a bit to visit a wetland park where an Oriental Stork had been reported recently, a rare bird with perhaps 100 individuals wintering this year in Japan. We parked and joined a group of pre-school children that had arrived in a bus painted with flowers. They were engrossed in feeding ducks, a hundred or more Northern Pintails happily waddling up for grain. In the water channel below, we found both Whooper and Tundra (Bewick's) Swan, so it made a great study of the head shape and bill pattern. Bryan used the park poster to describe it well to us. Katy picked out a few Tufted Ducks and Peg was scanning the right-hand cove when she spied the lone Oriental Stork. At one point we could see the stork along with Great Egret and two species of swan in one scope view -- nice! We moved to another entrance of the park, following a small water channel that led to the larger lake. Here we found numerous Tundra Swans and two White-fronted Geese having a bathing fest -- splashing, sparring and vocalizing -- perhaps inspired by the bright, sunny day. Scanning we found Japanese Wagtail, many Great-crested and a lone Little Grebe, two Little Ringed Plovers, an American Pipit, various ducks, Great Cormorant and Carrion Crow. Then we continued to Tokyo, such an organized and impressive modern city, with just enough time to visit one more park. This one was wooded, with trails along a watercourse where we again found several species of ducks and many Thick-billed Crows that were extremely vocal. Ginky smiled wide and said, "I love crows, they have so much personality!" Bryan had it wired and knew exactly where we should go and when. Big flocks of thrushes were frequenting fruiting trees and dropping down onto the grassy lawn that held pockets of fresh water. We saw numerous Pale Thrushes, the best views of our trip, and Dusky Thrush also. Right at the end, Peg



and Katy were lucky to see a Brown-necked Thrush land atop a large tree like a Christmas ornament. Calling to the others, we scanned through dozens of thrushes in a large flock for several minutes but weren't able to relocate it. Then back into Tokyo to our familiar hotel near the airport, where we opted to have an easy dinner right there. Called the Travel Café, it features pizza, hamburgers, Cobb salad and Risotto – a change of pace this night, but perfect as we had an early morning ahead.

Thurs., Jan. 19 **Honshu to Hokkaido: Flight to Kushiro | Red-crowned Cranes | Winter Wonderland | An Owl at an Onsen Appears!**

We got up very early to meet our 7:40AM flight, and we were all excited to go as the day dawned perfectly sunny and clear. It was time to grab a window seat as our route went right up the chain of mountains of Honshu, the Japanese Alps and some stunning isolated volcanoes. About 15 minutes from the descent, we crossed a very significant piece of geography, the deep-water Tsugaru Straits that divide Hokkaido from the rest of Japan called Blakiston's line. Much loved by the Japanese people, Hokkaido is prized for its combination of wild and pastoral beauty. We were excited because we had the chance to see new landscapes and new species. During the Pleistocene epoch, Hokkaido was connected to the mainland of Russia and thus retains an ecological affinity to northern Asia and Kamchatka. The rest of Japan is more closely related to Southeast Asia, with a Pleistocene connection from Honshu to the Korean Peninsula. We landed at 9:15AM and were soon on our way. Our first stop was the bridge over a river where many Red-crowned Cranes roost. The cranes were gone but we had a beautifully lit Eastern Buzzard and three Whooper Swans. Rob had been here previously, and it was fun to get his impressions upon returning. Our next stop was a well-known Ural Owl roost. The trail down was snowy, so Bryan did a quick check, returning and giving us the thumbs up, yes! The owl was fully out sunning itself, and we were treated to long and superlative views. Of course, we took numerous photos, aided by those watching with binoculars coaching, "eyes are open!" What a great way to start the day! We pulled ourselves away as we were



closing in on the most anticipated bird of the trip, Red-crowned Crane. They are regularly seen at a nearby farm that provides food annually, but still an incredible treat to be so close where we could hear them and watch their antics. Several pairs were unison calling, tossing their elegant necks to the sky. We watched some of them walk to a ridge to survey the terrain, then take off on elegant wings to the sky. We had ample time to watch and photograph these gorgeous cranes, some of our best moments of the trip.

From here we drove north to a lovely Onsen hotel on the banks of a stream. We settled in and came down to watch the glowing sunset. They served us the most lavish dinner one could imagine, dish after dish of fish, vegetables and meats. We were both amazed and stuffed! Full of food, we wobbled down to the lobby to wait for the hopeful arrival of Blakiston’s Fish-Owl, subject of the wonderful book, “Owls of the Eastern Ice.” Such an incredible creature, large with a huge wingspan, it has lost the disc-shaped face and silent flight typical of owls since its main food is fish. This lodge keeps a small pond they keep stocked with fish and has a pair of Fish-Owls that has been visiting almost nightly for close to 30 years! There was a board that listed the times of sightings, and at least a few times in the last week it had come in around 8:30. At 8:15 John came rushing in, clad in a towel and robe, fresh out of the Onsen. “He’s here, he’s hooting” was his excited announcement. And sure enough, within moments a Blakiston’s Fish-Owl dropped to our view. Another trip moment we will never forget.

Fri., Jan 20 Hokkaido: Rausu | Boat Trip for Eagle Viewing

At least three of us rose before dawn, watching the snow fall around the lit pond and river just outside the windows as we drank coffee. It was mesmerizingly peaceful. We’d all but given up hope when whoosh – in came this Onsen’s famous Fish-Owl. It landed so close that speechless Peg, Katy and Rob were able to take videos with their phones of it catching and consuming two fish. Wow! We all enjoyed a leisurely morning with an opportunity to eat way too lavishly at their extensive buffet. We also enjoyed the hot springs at the Onsen and birds at feeders. Eurasian Jay, Marsh Tit and Eurasian Nuthatch were star species. In the stream, a pair of Brown Dippers entertained us as they fed up and down the stream. Mike and Shirley pointed out the beautiful art collection of the hotel, the owner’s private collection, and we thoroughly enjoyed looking at paintings hung in the many rooms and hallways.



We walked near the hotel hoping to see an elusive Solitary Snipe. Koichi knew where to look, but huge snow berms from plows blocked our view of most of the river. We could see dippers, but no snipe for this trip as we had to meet our boat at Rausu. Accordingly, we did a quick convenience store lunch for salads, hot chicken and fresh sushi. The boat trip from the harbor at Rausu would be the highlight of the day. We bundled up and boarded, anticipating close encounters with eagles and gulls. Our captain had moved our departure time up to match a window of good weather – by 3 PM winter would be closing in. We arrived at 1:30pm and in no time left the dock in search of birds, but waves and wind made viewing tricky so we soon turned back, chumming as we retraced our course back to the harbor. For 20 minutes or so we experienced birder's joy. There were birds everywhere, diving for fish. Gorgeous Steller's Sea-Eagles and White-tailed Eagles were diving before our eyes alongside Common and Slaty-backed Gulls! It was windy and cold but we barely noticed. Photos of eagles were amazing, photos of us quite comical! We got back to the hotel around 4:30, glad for some time to rest, reorganize and warm up. Dinner was at the hotel, another lavish round of dishes.

Sat., Jan 21 **Winter Fury | Snow Harbors | Notsuke Peninsula and Nature Center**

We woke to a blizzard, hearing the wind howling past our windows, and as the first light of dawn emerged, we could see that we were in a white out. What to do? Koichi had faith that it was local so we soldiered on, packed up and headed down the road after breakfast which included squid! By the time we reached the next harbor, we could see some blue sky peeking out. We drove around the harbor looking for eagles and ducks. Harlequin Ducks, in all their colorful glory, were common here as were Black Scoter. We checked several harbors and found a plethora of ducks culminating in Bryan's discovery of four Canvasbacks - a mega rarity for Japan!

We saw a group of Steller's Sea Lions much at home in the blustery weather and waves. It was so cold, some decided only to bird from the bus, sharing snacks for fortification! After lunch we headed out to the Notsuke Peninsula, getting our first close-up look at Sitka deer, a couple of handsome bucks with antlers. Soon we found a prize: the much-sought-after Asian Rosy Finch. Our hearty ones got out for a closer view, but the winds were strong and cold. We took refuge in an excellent nature museum where the exhibits hinted of other seasons. Conversation turned to thoughts of seeing Hokkaido's splendid nature in green! Returning, we had super views



of a very bushy Red Fox, inquisitive as it hunted for mice along a concrete sea wall. We twisted ourselves to shoot photos out the steamy windows, a challenge! Dinner was back in the hotel where we ordered Spaghetti and beef curry.

Sun., Jan 22

**Nemuro Peninsula | Hanasaki Lighthouse | Nassapu
(easternmost point in Japan)**

We left the hotel at 8AM after breakfast. Today our route would take us out to the easternmost point in Japan, to the tip of the Nemuro Peninsula where a poignant monument includes an eternal flame under an arch, framing the view of one of the islands lost to Russia after WWII, only four kilometers away. Our day started with eagles - ample time to observe and photograph them out on the ice. Eagles locking talons. Chirping from the trees. Sitting on ice, waiting for ice fishermen to dump their remains. Loads of Steller's Sea-Eagles, and White-tailed Eagles mixing with Thick-billed Crows and Black Kites. Katy loved watching the agile kites, which were busy looking for every opportunity to harass the eagles. The big lenses came out and results were good! From here we went for a snowy walk through graceful birch woods. On this bright sunny day cross country skis would have been wonderful! The small birds were active: Marsh Tits, Japanese Tits and Eurasian Nuthatch. Classic Japan, so well organized, we were the first visitors there and so it was our task to set out the package of seed labeled "Sunday." Lunch was at what Bryan described as the "mother of all convenience stores," with fresh food made on site. We dove in, pretty experienced at this type of foraging now. For our final full afternoon, we made our way out the Nemuro Peninsula visiting a series of hides to scan for seabirds, visiting a gorgeous coastal area where the cliffs were decorated with iced-over waterfalls. We scanned the sea, turning up Harlequin Ducks, Red-throated Loons, a Eurasian Wigeon and several Northern Pintails. There were so many rocky outcrops, Peg fixated on finding shorebirds and had success, spotting a group of about a dozen Rock Sandpipers that we got scopes on. We hit the motherlode of alcids! Ancient Murrelet, Pigeon Guillemot, Spectacled Guillemot and Common Murre along with Red-necked Grebe and Red-throated Loon. An icy rock was covered with Pelagic Cormorants, but alas, no Red-faced. We did, however, spot a Japanese Cormorant, an uncommon sighting here.



Driving back, an inquisitive pair of Red Foxes were seen by the road. In the gorgeous, soft sunset light, two Short-eared Owls crossed the road, and as we watched, one coursed over the beach grass fields. We stopped at a bay to marvel at the golden light reflecting off the water filled with ducks and about 40 Whooper Swans – what a way to end the day – wow! Dinner was great fun. We went to downtown Nemuro where a small local bar/eatery could take our group. Bryan and Koichi had wisely pre-ordered a meal we could share – one bowl for each pair of us sitting across from each other. The beef and onions in a rich broth was luscious. We had potstickers and chicken skewers, followed with ice-cream parfaits, and some had ice cream wrapped in green tea mochi.

Mon., Jan 23 Our Flock Disperses | Return to Tokyo

Today was meant to be a pick-up day, with time to try for species we might be missing on land or sea. We had so loved the cranes, we opted to visit the crane center to enjoy them once again, but nature had its own plans. Koichi was alerted that a big winter storm was moving in and our evening flight might be cancelled. He and Bryan skillfully got us rebooked, but we had to make a dash and had to settle for a few quick stops and views of the cranes from our moving bus. Having seen so much, there was no need to risk missing our international flights. Our extraordinary adventure had come to a close. Those of us staying at the hotel overnight for flights the next day returned to the restaurant we enjoyed our first night, landing full circle back at the “hole in the wall” that had such delicious food. Much at home with each other, we enjoyed laughter and fun to the end. Special thanks for the supreme patience of guide Bryan Shirley who planned a perfect route to see Japan’s special birds while simultaneously translating Japanese so we could forage for lunch, and always found us perfect restaurants to end the day, relax and refuel!

Haibun for Red-crowned Cranes by Debbie Hall

Sun-slicked faces, faces chapped by winter winds and icy chill, we humans watch with widening eyes. O *Grus japonensis*, O symbol of happiness and immortality, O snow ballerinas! The blades of your wing feathers spread and flare as you lift and leap, elevate your glory, you would-be-lovers. O flocks of dancers adorned in soft white, stark white, inky black, your tiny ruby caps dotting our snow carpet field of vision. Your high-pitched calls penetrate the air, you chorus of sopranos pirouetting on stick-thin legs, you epitomes of grace. Oh rare cranes, nearly transformed into origami memories by a thousand pairs of careful hands. What hope Hokkaido brings as we watch with widened eyes.

Red-crowned cranes mass skies
crowded with snowflakes dusting
their wings—a new year!



Photo Credits: Group Photo (Peg Abbott - PA), Snow Monkey (Peter Heidrich - PH), Young Snow Monkey (Debbie Hall - DH), Steller's Sea Eagle (PH), Mountain Scenic (Takumi Koichi - TK), Red-Crowned Cranes (DH), Hooded Crane in Flight (PA), Blue Rock Thrush (PH), Bridge Scenic (PA), White-naped Crane Pair (PA), White-naped Crane taking flight (PA), Mandarin Ducks (PH), Long-tailed Tit (PA), Birding on the bridge (PA), Group Birding (TK), Crane Statue (TK), Group Birding 2 (TK), Common Kingfisher (TK), American Pipits (TK), Common Sandpiper (TK), Saunder's Gull (TK), Enjoying lunch x 2 (PA), Komatsu Airport (PA), Ramsar Wetland Scenic x2 (TK), Market (PA), Group under pergola (PA), Cheers! (PA), On the train (PA), Enjoying Lunch (PA), Lookout Scenic (PA), Bryan & Kiochi (PA), Building (PA), Statue (PA), Brown-eared Bulbul (PH), Great Spotted Woodpecker (PH), Snow Monkeys (PH), Brambling (DH), Matsumoto Castle (PA), Varied Tit (DH), Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker (PH), Warbling (Japanese) White-eye trio, Group Birding (PA), New Friends by the Water (PA), Common Pochard (PA), Oriental Stork (PA), Eurasian Widgeon (PA), Brambling (PA), Sharing Photos (PA), Great Egret (PA), Look at that View! (PA), Oriental Stork (PA), Ural Owl (PA), New Friends (PA), Red-crowned Cranes (PA), Bird Identification Sign (PA), Red-crowned Crane (PA), View from the plane (PA), White-tailed Eagles in Talon Lock (PH), Asian Rosy Finch (PH), Boat Trip (TK), Steller's Sea Eagle (TK), White-tailed Sea Eagle (TK), Birding by Boat (TK), View from the Lodge (PA), Sitka Deer (PA), Red Fox (DH), White-tailed Sea Eagle (PA), Long-tailed Duck (DH), Eurasian Nuthatch (PA), Birding by the water (TK), Coastal Scenic (PA), Oriental Greenfinch (PA), Red-crowned Cranes (DH)