

# Wild Japan: Summer in Hokkaido

## June 18 – 29, 2024 | Trip Report | by Peg Abbott



**With Guide Bryan Shirley, Guide/Driver Takumi Kiochi, Peg Abbott of Naturalist Journeys and 12 participants: Gerry, Claudia, Debbie, Pomera, Cilla, Kent, Denise, Jane, Analice, Susan, Martha and Doug.**



### **Tues., June 18**

### **Arrival in Tokyo**

We enjoyed meeting one another and were anxious to begin our journey! Several of the group had arrived early to explore Tokyo, so we were at various stages of jet-lag. The heavens opened to a big rain just about the time we were to walk to dinner, so we opted to stay at the hotel. It was still a festive atmosphere; we'd all been waiting to explore Wild Hokkaido and looked forward to tomorrow's flight.

### **Wed., June 19**

### **Tama River Tokyo | Lake Onuma | Flight to Wakkanai, Hokkaido | Ferry to Rebun Island | Lake Koetoi | Momoiwa "Peach Rock" | West Coast**

We had an optional birding walk this morning, meeting at six to walk a few blocks over to Tokyo's Tama River. To the south Mt. Fuji was visible, still impressive to see in spite of the haze. Birds included Eastern Spot-billed Duck, Great Cormorant, Large-billed Crow, Asian House Martin, and White-cheeked Starling; fifteen species in all. Then it was time to pack up and catch the hotel shuttle over to the nearby airport to board our ANA mid-morning flight. We picked up lunch goodies and snacks while in the airport, as once in Wakkanai in the north of Hokkaido, Koichi would be waiting to take us to the ferry and we wanted to watch our time.



It turned out we had some minutes to spare between arrival and the ferry so we routed by Lake Koetoi where we saw Tufted Duck, Eurasian Skylarks flight singing high in the sky, and an Osprey. The ferry ride turned out to be quite pleasant, with stunning views of Kirishima Volcano to our port side. We watched diligently for seabirds and found a number of Rhinoceros Auklets, quite a few Sooty Shearwaters, both Black-tailed and Slaty-backed Gulls out at sea, and feeding Japanese Cormorants. One gull eruption revealed a big school of Dall's Porpoises, feeding voraciously. They stayed pretty close the surface, turning tight circles acrobatically. After a couple of hours, we pulled into Kafuka Harbor, and saw the jetty filled with nesting Slaty-backed Gulls, a lone Vega Gull, and quite a few Japanese Cormorants. Just before getting to the island, we had good looks at two Pacific White-sided Dolphins.

It was a sun-bright spectacular afternoon, and we knew of a threat tomorrow to the good weather, so from the ferry we headed out across the island before checking in to our hotel, making the most of the day. We passed through a long tunnel, wound through the countryside, and made our way to dramatic towering hills above the sea at a place called Peach Rock. Two coves held colored boats and several homes, and the hills were decorated with flowers. We found a local geranium, large flowering day lilies, and wild rose bushes by the score. There were a purple columbine, several kinds of daisies, and dense patches of Fox and Cubs, also known as Orange Hawkweed. There were small waterfalls, above which Pacific Swifts were circling. We were able to see Middendorf's Grasshopper Warblers, a nice find. Siberian Rubythroat song surrounded us; we found several males on territory singing away – what a stunning bird! The light on the hills was electric and got even more so towards the day's end.

Dinner included a chance to try some local specialties - crab and sea urchin.

## **Thurs., June 20                      Rebun Island Exploring | Kushu Lake | Coast Road | Ferry Return to Wakkanai | Wetland Birding at Lake Meguma**

We drove to the southern end of the road on Rebun Island this morning at six for our optional outing. The undisputed highlight was seeing a massive White-tailed Eagle, an adult, flying along cliffs adjacent to the sea. It dwarfed the Slaty-backed and Black-tailed Gulls which were taking the opportunity to harass it.





We returned for a Japanese breakfast which was beautifully presented at an elegantly set table, but shocking to us was no coffee, just wheat tea. Thankfully, this was the only time on the trip that was so. A few had some instant in their private stash and we went with the flow and just enjoyed the many bowls of preparations. Lots of fish – Ruben Island is famous for harvests of sea urchin, a delicacy. Also pickled radish, some veggies and salad, and a cooked soup with octopus and mushrooms.

We packed up our gear, which we had stored in the lobby as this hotel was right by the ferry dock. We had wanted to make the most of our day on the Island of Flowers but alas, the weather deteriorated by the minute and while we braved a few stops it was too severe out to do the loop hike of several miles we'd planned into the key area for flowers. We did see the local endemic lady slipper orchid, a large white-flowering species that had trouble competing with the native ground bamboo, now creeping higher into the hills due to warming temperatures. Along the roadside, crews had cleared vegetation so the lady slipper could survive; what a beauty it is.

We drove north along the coast, stopping at rocks tall enough to serve as a gull rookery. There were several chicks, from tiny just-hatched to plump little juniors; fun to watch. We continued on and stopped by freshwater Kushu Lake where we found Mallards, Great Egrets and Gray Herons and, new for many, Black-browed Reed Warblers, singing. We continued around the north road, along the shore. Returning to the ferry we stopped at a point with offshore rocks where Spotted Seals were hauled out. We had seen their plump heads bobbing in and out of waves at other location but here we could see their pelage and shapes; fun!

There was a cold wind blowing, and we decided we wanted a hot lunch. The weather radar showed clouds and heavy rain closing in, so we also decided to take the earlier ferry back. We were able to stay out on the covered deck and the two-hour ride passed quickly, with similar sea birds, no dolphins, and no volcano views so we appreciated our good fortune the day before.

As we had taken the earlier ferry, and the Hokkaido mainland was clear, we had time to bird, and Bryan and Koichi chose an open meadow/wetland area not far from the airport. It turned out to be a terrific choice as we had good looks at Reed Bunting, Amur Stonechat, and Latham Snipe. The snipe was perched up on a post for easy viewing. A male Long-tailed Rose Finch came out on the road and we saw several more in flight. We found



Eastern Yellow Wagtail, Masked Bunting and Oriental Greenfinch. From the van we also spied Bull-headed Shrike on the wires and an Eastern Marsh Harrier coursing the fields.

We checked into our hotel, savoring the smell of coffee as we entered – promising for our early birding tomorrow! We had a break, and then drove a short ways to a restaurant that featured sixties music and western food. It was fun to see Japanese people enjoying beef stew and mashed potatoes, grilled chicken, hamburgers, steaks, and fries, and we did much the same. This kind of restaurant is relatively rare so we took advantage of the opportunity.

## **Fri., June 21                      Wakkanai Forest Park Birding | Sarobestu IBA Wetland Birding and Wildflowers | Drive to Asahidake**

We had an optional walk at Wakkanai City Park this morning and it was time well spent! We parked by a campground framed by a loop trail just a few minutes from our hotel. Caution signs were up as a couple of Brown Bears had been seen here a few weeks ago, but we saw no current sign. We got into birds right away, with Brown-headed Thrush and White Wagtail hopping around between tents at the forest edge. Above us a flock of Coal Tits made noisy calls and Doug called out as a Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker shot out of a nest hole. The flutelike call of Japanese Robin drew us on up the trail and with some patience we got to see it, Gerry spotting it on a horizontal branch from the trail. Keen-eared Bryan heard an Asian Stubtail, a skulking warbler, and we spent some time waiting for it to show which it finally did, much to our delight. The park had a great mix of trees including Japanese Emperor Oak, Sakhalin Spruce, Greene's Mountain Ash, Birch, Japanese Elm and in the understory, quite a few rhododendron in bloom. The trail was easy to walk and the canopy sheltered us some from the light rain.

We returned for breakfast, one of our favorites of the trip. There were so many choices, but all were labeled in English so we could choose with confidence. There were myriad vegetables, pickled and fresh, salad, fish of several varieties, a giant bowl of salmon eggs, pork stew, and also fruit, yoghurt and breads, as a small nod to our western diet. Debbie discovered bits of baked cheesecake that sent several back for round two. They had rich, dark coffee, much welcome after yesterday's no-coffee surprise.

Fortified, after time to pack up without a rush, we left for Sarobestu Wetlands, part of the national park along with Ruben Island. Sarobestu is a wetland site, a peat bog situated on the coast going south from Wakkanai. It was a floral wonderland today, and even with a steady light rain we had a terrific morning here. We walked a



mile or so on a boardwalk, seeing a few Amur (Ezo) Lilies in bloom. Soon there were dozens, then hundreds, then literally thousands of blooms. Koichi said he'd been here many times but had never seen them this profuse – it was magical. Analice, Claudia and Jane described it with a Wizard of Oz sense of wonder. The lilies' deep orange was interspersed with the white of False Hellebore, and deep purple of iris. Cinnamon Fern gave the fields a wonderful texture and, on small shrubs dotting the plain, we found Chestnut-eared Bunting, Masked Bunting, and Stonechat.

Overhead the strange calls of Latham's Snipe displaying occurred several times, much to our delight. Doug got a photo of one way across the plain, perched on the light post of an adjacent road. We tried for Japanese Bush Warbler, which filled the area with song; it remained loud but elusive. Over by a display of heavy equipment once used to harvest peat in the area, we had quick views of Sakhalin Grasshopper Warbler, a migrant that arrives late, so new for Bryan in Japan as usually his last trip of the year here is in May. As we timed for flowers as well as birds, they were present and nesting, evidenced by Peg seeing one with a beak full of at least four fuzzy moths.

We had lunch at the little café at the site of the Visitor Center, after time to view displays and a short film. The evolution of the peat bog was well depicted and they had skins of several of the area's birds and mammals. Hot ramen soup with scallops was a big hit; the dining room strangely quiet save for slurps as we refueled. They had soft-serve ice-cream and small butter-rich cookies – we left with happy bellies for our afternoon drive.

The rain came in stronger after we left and we were grateful it had held off for a good morning of birding. Our afternoon was just for travel; we went south towards the mountains, passing through towns, rice fields (new in the last twenty years on Hokkaido, a change from potatoes due to warming conditions).

We got to the lovely Bearmonte Hotel in time for those who wanted to have a soak in the onsen ahead of dinner. Jane was the first to enjoy this and she kept this up for the full trip, loving this aspect of Japanese culture. After dinner we met in a spacious library to tally up our growing list. Our botany fans were poring over field guides, working with Google Translate to get the Japanese name which might lead to a scientific name we could trace.





**Sat. June 22**

## **Daisetsuzan NP, Asahidake Area via the Ropeway Gondola | Visitor Center | Campground Walk**

This morning, we had two choices -- a rigorous hike up Mt. Asahidake, the highest mountain in Hokkaido or a birding and wildflower foray at a more leisurely pace. Debbie, Kent and Cilla were up to the task and joined Koichi. They had a window of nice weather and cool temperatures to make the 2000-foot elevation gain a bit easier. It was blustery but not bad, and the flowers and views looking back down on lakes and forests were well worth the strain.

All of us got a good jump start on the adventures by taking a cable car up the mountain, one of several "rope ways" that lead to alpine trails. The cars were large (could easily hold 20+ persons) and they did not swing much while affording some fine views. This one saved us about 1700 feet of climbing, and put us out just at tree line. We saw Siberian Dwarf Stone Pine growing with various shrubs including several of the heath family. The ground was covered with crowberry, mosses, and a lovely rose family member, *Geum pentapetalum*, locally called Chinguruma.

Those of us not scaling the peak walked a loop trail that proved to be pretty challenging due to large rocks and steps up and down as we wound around some glacial tarn lakes. The vistas were magical, as mist came and went revealing the progress of our hikers. The mist was actually part weather and part steam from myriad fumaroles that occurred in a linear angle up the mountain. At a nice open resting point, we met a group of Japanese birders and together watched with success for views of Japanese Accentor (an endemic to Japan), Red-flanked Bluetail and Pine Grosbeak. A pair of grosbeaks came in to feed quite close and remained, giving us all good views.

Skylarks and Gray Wagtails flew about vocalizing. An Oriental Cuckoo flew in and out of a ridgeline of brush. Our flower enthusiasts were down on hands and knees, with so many species to observe. Big gaudy blooms of Yellow-flowered Rhododendron were plentiful, as were Wedge-leafed Primrose blossoms. An odd one grew on a tall stalk, Japanese Hyacinth, locally called Shojobakama, *Heloniopsis orientalis*.

We enjoyed some down time in the afternoon, much appreciated by all. At 4 PM we met for birding, veering off the road into our hotel to walk a wood chip path around to a campground. The park ranger had described a rocky area here that might be good for finding Pika. We did not find the rocks or the pika, but did get good views



at a couple of White-throated Needletails overhead, and on the trunk of a large tree good views of Treecreeper. There were many flowers in bloom, a completely different set than those up on the mountain, so Peg and Claudia and Analice were thrilled with the blooms and kept falling behind. There were several types of orchids, blooming Skunk Cabbage and northern-affinity plants like Bunchberry and Foamflower. Walking back, we were in for a treat, just after Peg joked, “we need a good bird to give us a rest stop on this hill,” keen-eyed Martha called out, “Narcissus Flycatcher”. What a beauty, not unlike a Blackburnian Warbler in vivid orange and black colors and pattern. Bryan encouraged it closer with a call for those who had missed it and in it came at eye-level about 20 feet away. Wow! Most of us then headed in to freshen up for dinner; Martha and Doug continued on and were rewarded with sighting a Great Spotted Woodpecker. Nice!

Dinner was another buffet, people’s plates looked like rainbows with all the fresh choices. Those liking sushi and sashimi were oh so happy, and those not as keen found plenty to choose from. Every day we were having fresh veggies and fresh salads. This restaurant liked to feature local foods including local potatoes that were delicious.

## **Sun., June 23                      Morning Walk Asahidake Area | Travel Day Between National Parks | Rainbow Fountain Park Woodpecker Search | Northern Pika Habitat Walk | Tomita Lavender Farm | Shirogane Blue Pond | Akan**

We started with an optional early morning walk around the hotel, up towards the cable car station and a boardwalk adjacent to it that went out to a meadow viewpoint. It was strangely quiet, with the exception of Japanese Bush Warbler, so we decided the time had come to SEE that skulker. We had seen bits and pieces of it, and bullet-like flights across clearings, but this morning it finally teed up for us all to get a cracking view. Hooray! We enjoyed Gray Wagtails, an Oriental Cuckoo calling, and a nice show of flowers.

Breakfast was elaborate, with multiple tables of fresh food, some which you could cook right there on site in your own hot pots. They had wild vegetables, boiled melon, and braised fern fiddleheads and “all in” Hokkaido Hamburgers. We were getting used to this dinner-style breakfast, but thankfully yoghurt was always available; today there were even English Muffins.





We packed up and headed out to our next destination, making a series of stops along the way. Bryan knew of a small lake where Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers were likely nesting. We heard them almost immediately as we exited the bus and went to the lakeshore, only to see one, then the other of the pair fly overhead and into dense woods. Luckily there was access to the area they flew towards just off the parking lot, so we backtracked and went into the woods. We could hear one calling and tracked it down; in time we all got good views of the very vocal little female. Success! This species is known only from Hokkaido in Japan and was a life bird for Koichi, who in this last year pulled ahead of his mentor Bryan for overall species in Japan. Number 404 for him today; we all shared his smiles. We also found a couple of species of dragonflies here and a lone Japanese Giant Hornet investigating holes in the pillars holding up the park gate.

Our next stop was a trailhead where a fairly short but rocky trail led up to Pika habitat. Koichi had had previous good luck seeing them here while hiking. Indeed, a number of Japanese visitors were sitting and waiting; some had seen them in the last hour, drying grasses for storage on this sun-bright day. We worked our way up through an alley of Marie's Fir, Japanese Pine and Labrador Tea and sat to wait. We spent 30 minutes or so, and heard two calls, but sadly no Pika sighting today. It was a scenic spot, with mountain views of a volcanic peak decorated with fumaroles up towards the summit.

We worked up an appetite on this walk, so we next headed to lunch and a chance to wander in a profusion of color at the Tomita Lavender Farm, established in 1958. It was a sunny Sunday and many others had this same idea. There were numerous tour buses, but overall the crowd was tolerable, well-ordered and having a wonderful time – mostly posing for photos against the floral display. We had lunch at an open-air café and capped off the visit with our choice of lavender or fresh melon soft ice-cream. Yum!

As we had switched gears to visit this lovely but generally touristic spot, we chanced another, a cerulean-colored lake created by a construction accident and now a beloved photo stop. The Shirogane Blue Pond was popular today, but we joined in the fun for a half hour or so and took artsy photos of dead trees and their reflections in the stunning blue water. A lone Meadow Bunting posed up on one of the dead trees for a brief moment. We learned they are purposefully creating another such pond; the water comes from nearby Shirahige Falls, but passes a cliff laced with aluminum oxides on the way, and its aluminum-infused water shines this surreal blue. We did notice “no swimming” signs!





Leaving here, it was time to make tracks, as we had four hours to go, and Koichi headed to the main highway. We had quite a drive, and clouds were closing in, a big rain in the forecast for tomorrow. We got to our hotel and were immediately calmed, and a bit amazed at the beauty of the lobby, just walking in there was art and carvings everywhere! Our rooms were large and simple but luxurious, beautiful mats on the floor, ample storage, views of Lake Akan, and a seating area around a sunken floor facing the view.

We came down to dinner and were delighted to find western, Chinese and Japanese choices. For variety many of us selected the Chinese and really enjoyed it. We also tried some wine made in Hokkaido, a dry white wine, and it was good. Cilla and Jane went up to the 8<sup>th</sup> floor onsen, and made their way to the outside pool where temperatures were delightful – a hot water soak in the cool night air. They enjoyed listening to the Japanese women laugh and talk, a nice custom and a nice way to end the day.

**Mon., June 24**

**Rainy Day for us at Akan-Mashu NP | Akan Forest  
Birding | Ainu Village and Dance Presentation | Black  
Woodpeckers at Yobito | Lake Tofutsu “Swan Park” |  
Utoro**

The promised (unseasonal) rain came in on schedule, but quite a few of the group ventured out this morning anyway. We walked from our hotel to a trailhead of Akan – Mashu National Park. We walked a wide, bark-chipped trail along the lakeshore and through dense deciduous woods draped with mosses. We found mushrooms, a white-flowering monkshood, and boiling mudpots, locally known as bokkes along the turn-around spot at the lakeshore. The signage was excellent and while we missed seeing views of the mountains, it still felt good to get out and walk. Eastern Crowned Warbler was a new species for us and we got good views. We returned to an elaborate breakfast, with choices of full Japanese style or western. For some, pancakes and donuts and smoothies were just a great treat – others kept to their favorite fishes and beef and pork stew. Susan had taken time to walk in the native-inspired garden and look in detail at the art and carvings.

We had some free time, either to soak in the onsen or visit the shops or the local museum. Some of the shop had local artisans carving, or weaving traditional open-weave bags of shredded bark, hand spun as it if were yarn – fascinating! The exhibits were helpful in understanding the Ainu culture, and quite a bit reminded us of our



northern Alaskan peoples. We attended a dance performance, more like theater, with lovely lighting. Four women and one man did a series of dances; the effect was soothing and impressive.

This cultural and free-time break was the perfect match for a day of rain, but by lunch it was time to move on. We wanted to save time for birding so decided on a 7-11 store, very popular in Japan, to forage in and then eat our selections on the bus. At these places we had good fun shopping each time. Koichi pulls the bus in, and we fan out to find what we like; some opt for sandwiches, some sushi, some curry rolls and some a mix of snacks. Japan outdoes the USA for snack choices. We marvel at the rows of local foods, in one there was about 15 different kinds of dried squid. You can even buy mixed nuts with salted fish mixed in; they love their fish in every imaginable form.

We had failed to find Black Woodpecker on our morning walk, often encountered in the lush woods there. So we tried again at a spot Bryan and Koichi had had success in May. It was raining pretty heavily, but a joyous Narcissus Flycatcher did not let that stop it as it posed for us and sang and sang from the edge of the parking lot. We walked a boardwalk, finding a Great Spotted Woodpecker and White-bellied Green-Pigeons, but no luck with our hoped for Black Woodpecker. This was an ideal woodpecker spot with loads of dead snags in wet soils, many of which showed recent feeding work by these large (Pileated-sized) woodpeckers. We called to them but no answer, so resigned we walked back, balancing on some narrow planks, to the bus.

By then it had stopped raining as hard, and both Peg and Bryan simultaneously said, "we should give this one more try". And, we had success! We watched a male Black Woodpecker fly in, fly to another tree, and with some intense spotting found it again. It stayed somewhat obscured but we all found windows to view and had all the time we wanted with this magnificent creature, which flies not unlike a crow. Pomera was one with a really big smile, this kind of birding adventure was fun!

Rain returned so we decided our next birding stop best be a wetland. We pulled the bus into a river area with sand bars and small islands and did really well in the half-hour or so we were there, picking up a Eurasian Oystercatcher, Little Ringed Plover, Common Goldeneye, a couple of Northern Pintails, a Common Cuckoo and Black-headed Gull.





One more stop for hot drinks and fuel, and we continued on to Otoro, our modern hotel there which would be home for the next two nights.

## **Tues., June 25                      Birding from Shiretoko Daichi Hotel | Utoro Port | Kamuy-Waka Boat Cruise | Hike to Furepe Falls Overlook | Scenic Drive and Brown Bear Search**

Martha and Doug, as typical, were out early, and had spotted a singing Meadow Pipit which they shared with us before we got on the bus. It was joined by an Amur Stonechat, nice!

We headed to the port for our cruise boat to Cape Utoro, and the harbor was busy with birds. We saw many Pacific Swift (about 40), three Spectacled Guillemot at close range, numerous (100+) Slaty-backed Gulls, Gray Herons and, bobbing along the jetty, White Wagtail. Perhaps the highlight here was getting scope views of Blue Rock Thrush. The scenery was grand, with lush hills coming down to the sea, but alas, this was the first day in 12 that the Captain and crew were not able to spot a Eurasian Brown Bear coming in regularly to a local fishing camp. We saw several Japanese Cormorant on rocks offshore, and returned to the port.

In the afternoon we elected to hike, and went to an overview of the waterfall we had seen from the boat, Furepe Falls. We had a good variety of species, including White-bellied Green Pigeon, Eastern Crowned Warbler, Oriental Cuckoo, and Oriental Greenfinch. Two very tolerant Sika Deer and their fawns were just off the pathway. We had to route around a bear closure sign by the Visitor Center, but no bear here either. But it was lush and green and good for everyone's spirits to get out and walk.

Koichi visits this park often and he and Bryan encouraged us out at dusk to drive some quiet roads in the park, again in search of bear. We saw beautiful flowers, several deer, and by a bridge got out for good views of Brown Dipper, a pair. No luck on the big bruin, so we headed in to our hotel for a nice dinner and time to tally up our species.



**Wed., June 26**

## **Return Bear Search | Rausu Harbor | Change of Plans to Notsuke Peninsula | Yoroushi Onsen | Blakiston's Fish Owl!**

Northern trips require flexibility; all this lush and green comes from rains and this morning it was still misty and wet. We repeated our drive in the park to try to see Brown Bear, as the habitat seemed so perfect and Koichi had had good luck before. The rain kept temperatures cool so our hopes were high, but alas, no bear. We did see several Sika deer, a few with fawns, and a Red Fox, the latter quite close to our hotel.

We were to stop at the pass going over to Rauso, but it was totally fogged in, so we opted to head down on the drier side of the range. Pomera and Denise remarked on the scenery and fertility of the farmland.

We stopped at the Visitor Center in the coastal town of Rauso, and scanned the harbor, seeing gulls bathing with abandon, hundreds of Slaty-backed and a few Black-tailed. There were Spectacled Guillemots, Rhinoceros Auklets, and gorgeous views of the disputed Kuril Islands. A big dorsal fin cut the water and our scopes were trained -Orca!!

Lunch was foraging at the 7-11. Jane discovered smoothies, Pomera a fresh fruit and cream cheese sandwich, Kent a delicious portable plate of sushi. We were juggling our purchases when Gerry called excitedly from the parking lot -- Long-tailed Rose Finch! We rushed back and got fine views of a pair. Chestnut-eared Starlings flew in and posed nearby; with a Russet Sparrow we had a nice trio of sightings as a bonus to this lunch stop.

We then headed out to the Notsuke Peninsula, a narrow strip of land jutting out into the Sea of Okhotsk. This 17-mile sandspit is a spectacular example of longshore drift. A large freshwater lagoon and marsh has developed in the shelter of the spit which has a hook-like shaped tip. We found numerous ducks, at a distance but possible to scope. Bryan picked out a late migrant Brant and a good number of Falcated Ducks. We found a Whooper Swan (also a late record), Eurasian Wigeon, Green-winged Teal and Northern Shoveler and Northern Pintail amid the scores of Mallards.

There were quite a few Sika Deer, mother with fawns and, resting in tall grass, two big males with racks in velvet





and a young one with nubby points.

A Red Fox surprised us; it was carrying a big fish and it seemed to be on a mission. It trotted along between us and the line of concrete tetrapods that secure the shoreline; we followed and kept up with it in the bus. It finally quit in a corner of the tetrapods, perhaps a den? Denise and others were able to get some good photos of this memorable sighting by doing the equivalent of yoga to get to an open window on the bus.

The scenic views were impressive on both sides, oceanside we could see volcanic Kunashir Island, the southernmost island of the Kuril Archipelago lost to Russia after the second World War. To the inland side we could see the full range of Shiretoko Peninsula, standing tall, lush and green.

We enjoyed a break at the visitor center after some great birding tallying up several species of ducks, Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler, Reed Bunting and Gray Heron. Japan does a lovely job with their parks, sadly little of the signage was in English, so we used Google translate or reached out to Bryan or Koichi to grasp the interpreted text. One section needed no translation, a collection of drawings by local children of Red-crowned Cranes, lovely!

We returned for one of the most elaborate dinners of the trip, almost too many dishes to behold. We ate a bit early to be out by the fish pond platform the Blakiston's Fish Owl was known to come in for. Susan and Denise were determined to stay up until it came and patiently waited. They kept watch as others lounged in the sunken fireplace area, at times dozing off. Then, as several had gone to bed, right about 11PM it came! We texted a few that came rushing back, and all present got some nice photos and fine views.

## **Thurs., June 27**

## **Boat Excursion from Rasau | Fin Whale! | Kaminoko Pond | Blakiston's Fish Owl**

We retraced our steps as today dawned bright and clear. We had a 9:00 boat to catch so had an early breakfast and headed to the port in Rasau. We passed many dairy farms; on a few the lucky cows had been turned out to graze on the kelly-green fields. Hokkaido has a hearty breed of Holsteins and proudly serves many fresh dairy products including ice-cream.



Right at the margin of our road, with only a hedgerow to separate us, we found a regal pair of Red-crowned Cranes. They moved off slowly and we soon saw why; a tiny, few days old chick! We watched them feed and, as a Long-billed Crow flew by, moved protectively towards it.

We stopped quickly at the Visitor Center, which doubles as a local fish market loaded with fresh crab and mackerel. Our boat was pretty full, but we got good outside seating. There were sightings of Slaty-backed Gulls and Rhinoceros Auklets as we left the harbor. Almost immediately the captain spotted Orca fins and, as we revved up the speed, on the port side off the water came a monstrous-sized clean Black and white seabird - Laysan Albatross! It was so fast we failed on photos, but some of the group caught a view as it flew away. Soon we were surrounded by Orca, mothers with calves plying the waves as they fed. On this sunny day, the pod was spread wide across the bay; in the distance we could see the big male feeding. Eventually we moved over toward it.

Bryan called out "Whale!" and the captain turned the boat to head over to this large cetacean being viewed by one other boat. It turned out to be the first Fin Whale sighting of the year, and it was in no hurry to get away from us. The whale surfaced again and again, quite close to the boats, an absolutely incredible memory now for all of us as we could hear it spout and see its full body, wow! Mammals topped the day, for as it can be with birding, over the last stormy days they had reported scores of alcids flocking and feeding, including one Tufted Puffin (a small colony breeds on cliffs on a northern Kuril island). But on our sunny day, alcids were a few, and all were Rhinoceros Auklets. One Sooty Shearwater came off the water at the front of the boat and we had good views of a dark, black footed albatross. For Gerry, who greatly admires their essence and flight, it was a trip highlight.

We were out on the boat about two hours, looking at the grand scenery of the mountains of the Shiretoko Peninsula. A big gaggle of gulls flew over as we re-entered the harbor, among them one late Glaciously-winged.

It was time to continue our day, and with such good weather we decided to also retrace our steps of the past, so we foraged at the local convenience store with plans to eat up at the top of the pass we had crossed in fog, now with a view. With packages of sushi, soups, salads, and sandwiches we drove an incredibly scenic route in close proximity to the sea. The parking area was full; two different groups of Japanese photographers to capture photos of Gross. We did see one fly over, and a Coal Tit, and many Pacific Swifts. Plus some stunning mountain





views. Kent and Cilla were itching to climb the green hills!

Bryan and Koichi knew of a pretty pond on our route home, making a big loop through Utoro and over another pass to get back to the onsen. We took a walk at Kaminoko Pond and were able to find, to Debbie's delight, Eurasian Jay, Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, White-backed Woodpecker, and Sakhalin Leaf Warbler. We heard the calls of Japanese Thrush and Japanese Robin but they were not bold enough to come in.

Back at the onsen some relaxed in the common area with big windows and watched the river as earlier in the day some of our group who had stayed back to relax had seen Brown Dipper and Common Kingfisher. Others enjoyed a soak before another elegant, multi-course dinner.

To our delight, the Blakiston's Fish Owl put on a command performance. It arrived by 9:20 pm, fed on a few fish, but flew off after not much time. This male is a known individual, at least 30 years old, and very faithful. Its mate comes occasionally, but this male rarely misses a night. To our delight it flew off only a short way, and dropped into the stream. It hopped between rocks, actively hunting, for an hour and a half! We watched it intently, then one by one peeled off to get some sleep. What a day!

**Fri., June 28**

**Yorouchi Onsen | Kushiro Marsh NP Boardwalk | Lunch at Do-re-mi-fa "so" Café of the Crane Place | Canoe on the Toro Lake – Kushiro River Circuit | Hosooka Overlook | Japanese Farewell Dinner**

This morning gave us a chance to do some birding around Yorouchi Onsen and the river that flows through the property. Kiochi had told us excitedly at breakfast that he had a quick look at Crested Kingfisher, but we were not able to relocate it. Our early birders did see Brown Dipper here. We packed up and then drove through farmlands, highly productive soils in this area rimmed by mountains to the west. We took a boardwalk trail through wetlands near a lake, and were able to spot Common Kingfisher, a very close feeding White-backed Woodpeckers, numerous Black-browed Reed Warblers and Eastern Crowned Warblers, Bull-headed Shrikes, Sakhalin Grasshopper Warblers and one of our most common species, the Masked Bunting.



We set lunch up at the popular winter crane feeding spot as in winter we'd had good looks at Long-tailed Tit, also called the Snow Fairy for its white head, a race particular to Hokkaido. The icy winter scene had been transformed by flowers, and though we walked through the gardens and had a delicious green curry, the feeders were down and no tits were around. We feasted on ice-cream and looked at the Snow-Fairy trinkets and headed on. We also checked two regular winter locations for known Ural Owl roosts, but no one was home.

The highlight event of our day was a canoe ride on Lake Toro and then a fast moving stream and for most of us it was the absolutely perfect, peaceful end to our adventures. The canoe crew was there to meet us and many of us joined in the paddling to help as it was a windy day and moving with the current and stretching our muscles just felt good. We saw a White-Tailed Eagle pair, and then a lone bird right down on the river shore. Fast but present were at least two flocks of Long-tailed Tit, and to our surprise, a Mandarin Duck in with a couple of Spot-billed Ducks. By now we knew many of the calls and we were serenaded by Eastern Crowned Warbler, Japanese Bush Warbler, Black-browed Reed Warbler and Gray Wagtail. Doug caught a quick glimpse of Common Kingfisher. The river scenery felt like we were bathed in beauty, and far away from the current chaos of the world – priceless.

We got back in time to freshen up and ready for an all-out, multi-course Japanese dinner, some of it cooked right at the table. After dinner, Peg encouraged all to share their highlights and favorite birds. This is always fun but notable here was the number of different species and moments mentioned on our Sampler journey. A common theme was owls and cranes, but several of the smaller species also made the list.

Martha especially urged us to try owling, and though untried at this spot, the small group that was not concerned with packing and tomorrow's flights had success for Ural Owl! They were not that far from the hotel and spotted one perched on a light pole; Bryan got a shot of it facing him before it flew away. Birding is always an adventure! They were also looking for Raccoon Dog, Tanuki, which tends to be found around buildings and boardwalks and more open areas. No luck on this elusive mammal, though.

## **Sat., June 29                      Hotel Grounds Birding | Glittering Kingfisher Good-bye | Departures**

We had one last go at birding, meeting up at 6 am to walk the wooded trail behind our hotel. There were six of us, and we ambled out recording Masked Bunting and a distant Latham's Snipe across a farm field decorated by





horses grazing. We heard several Eastern Crowned Warblers, then heard an odd single note repeated with urgency, and for once got super views of Sakhalin Leaf Warbler, disturbed by a Large-billed Crow that left as we approached. We had a mixed flock with both Marsh and Japanese Tits that we sorted out before returning for breakfast. This was plated as a full Japanese breakfast, with soups and salads and fish and eggs, the latter cooking in small pots at our table.

Bryan interrupted breakfast with a welcome announcement of a Common Kingfisher at the pond behind our rooms. We all made a dash and got fine views of this turquoise gem, a great send off to a great twelve days in Hokkaido!

*Photos: Scenic (Takumi Koichi – TK), Group (Peg Abbott - PA), Wildflowers (PA), Orca (TK), Blakiston's Fish Owl (TK), Female White-backed Woodpecker (TK), Black-browed Reed Warbler (TK), Oriental Cuckoo (TK), Amur Stonechat (TK), Mountain Scenic (TK), Coastal Scenic (TK), Group Walk (Claudia Van Wie - CW), Spotted Seal (TK), Sooty Shearwater (TK), Wildflowers (TK), Group (TK), Flowers (TK), Pine Grosbeak (TK), Siberian Rubythroat (Doug McEachern - DM), Flowers (TK), Eurasian Wren (TK), Group (TK), Takumi Koichi (PA), Scenic (PA), Scenic (TK), Pine Grosbeak (TK), Moth (CW), Wildflowers (TK), Narcissus Flycatcher (DM), Female Great Spotted Woodpecker (TK), Carrion Crow (DM), Blue Pond (PA), Group Birding (PA), Ice cream! (PA), Crane art (PA), Flower field (PA), Long-tailed Rosefinch (TK), Sika Deer (CW), Group Birding (PA), Forest Scenic (PA), Japanese Grocery (PA), Group Birding (TK), Butterfly (Denise Jeffrey - DJ), Masked Bunting (TK), Group Walk (TK), Spectacled Guillemot (TK), Bryan (PA), The docks (PA), Blakiston's Fish Owl (TK), Japanese Food (PA), Lighthouse (PA), Red Fox (DJ), Sika Deer (TK), Group Birding (PA), Scenic (TK), Red-crowned Cranes (TK), Boat Trip (TK), Rhinoceros Auklet (TK), Orca (TK), Fin Whale (TK), Blakiston's Fish Owl (TK), Group Birding (PA), Male White-backed Woodpecker (TK), Red-crowned Crane and young (TK), Canoe Ride (TK), Group Photo (TK), Eurasian Jay (DM)*