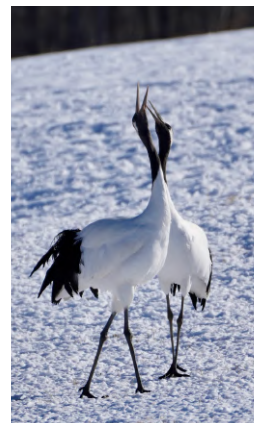
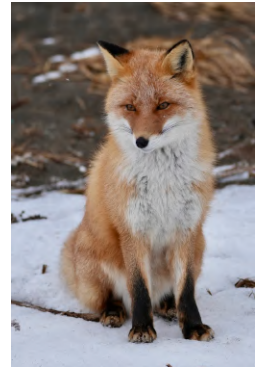


Japan Birding & Nature | Jan. 7 – 23, 2025

Trip Report | by Emily Renkey



Guides Bryan Shirley and Takumi Koichi with Emily Renkey of Naturalist Journeys and participants Adriaan, Donna, Penny, Carol, Wendi, Stephanie, Carrie, Rena, Jeanne, Pete, Cliff, and Lise



Early Arrivals | Exploring Tokyo

Most of our group arrived early to spend additional time exploring the city of Tokyo. The birding was kept to a minimum in the city, but a few group members got to see the Azure-winged Magpie and many saw both Large-billed and Carrion Crows while exploring cultural sites. There were many other Tokyo highlights including temples, the extensive fish market, and the ease at which you could travel around the city on the rail system.



Tue., Jan. 7: Introductions

The final two members of our group, Emily and Rena, arrived today and got settled into our wonderful hotel. Bryan, Pete and Cliff walked along the river for some afternoon birding and photography. Our restaurant was a nearby brewery, just a short walk from the Metropolitan hotel. We met up at dinner and had the chance to do initial introductions and hear about everyone's first impressions of this amazing country thus far.

Wed., Jan. 8: Flight to Kagoshima | First Cranes

We had an early breakfast, served as a buffet at the Hotel Metropolitan Tokyo Haneda. Those who had arrived early had already found their favorite dishes, with dumplings being a highlight for many. After breakfast, we walked across the street with our bags and hopped on the monorail to head to the airport. The train station was clean and the monorail was very efficient; we arrived at the terminal for the flight to the island of Kyushu in less than ten minutes. The two-hour flight to the Kagoshima prefecture, at the southern end of Kyushu (meaning "Nine Provinces") region of Japan, provided spectacular views of mountains on both sides of the plane, including the active stratovolcano, Sakurajima. Upon landing, we were met by our wonderful driver, Koichi, who would remain with us for the rest of the trip.

Our first stop was a 7-Eleven where we navigated an overwhelming number of tasty options. Bryan helped with translations and recommendations and then we were off!

Our birding luck was off to a great start when Wendi spotted our first Crested Kingfisher only thirty minutes or so into our drive. This can be a tough species to see and we were all quite excited that we had good looks at it! Shortly after, we made a spontaneous stop on a bridge along the Ana River. There we watched Japanese, Grey, and White Wagtails moving along the river, picking insects from the moving surface or grabbing them in flight. We caught glimpses of a group of White-bellied Green Pigeons circling overhead and both Gray and Striated Heron perched along the river bank.

Upon arrival in Izumi, we had a sneak peek at the reclamation fields where we would be birding the following day. As we entered the east fields of the reclamation area, Bryan discussed the history and conservation of two of the main species we would be seeing: the Hooded Crane and White-naped Crane. As we drove slowly through the fields, we cracked the bus windows open so we could listen for their calls. We spent an hour or so observing them, and other species in and around the fields including Common Snipe, Northern Lapwing and Eurasian Skylark.



We stopped at the gate on our way out to have our tires sprayed; one of the many precautions they were taking to prevent the spread of avian flu. While there seemed to be an abundance of cranes, this was a reminder that their populations are vulnerable and disease outbreaks are a huge risk for the survival of both species. More than 80% of Hooded Cranes and around half of the White-naped Crane population overwinter in this small area.

We continued on to the Wing hotel, where we would spend the next three nights. After check-in, we enjoyed a delicious dinner nearby and our first species checklist before our first full birding day in the morning.

Thur., Jan. 9: Izumi Crane Observation Center | Sake Factory | Samurai Residences

This morning, we departed after an early breakfast to ensure we arrived at the Izumi Crane Observation Center during morning feedings; a period of heightened activity. The temperatures in southern Japan were unusually cold, and with the wind chill we were already bundled in the clothes we brought for Hokkaidō! As we stepped out of the van, we were greeted by cranes flying overhead and the sky loud with vocalization. What an amazing way to start the day!

Our group ascended to the observation deck overlooking thousands of wintering cranes with even more constantly arriving to feed on the grain that had just been distributed. We paid no mind to the wind as we took in the beauty of these large birds descending from overhead, legs and wings outstretched, to join the others. After a few minutes of taking in the scene, we got out our scopes to scan the fields for other species. It wasn't long before Bryan found three Common Cranes as well as a Swan Goose! Hundreds of Northern Pintails and Eastern Spot-billed Ducks foraged nearby, before erupting into the air. This likely meant a predator was nearby and, sure enough, Bryan quickly got the scope on a Eurasian Goshawk in a distant tree.

When the activity started to slow, we took a stroll to the river. On our walk we spotted passerines flitting between trees. A flock of Russet Sparrows landed on a nearby roof and we had a nice look at a colorful Daurian Redstart. Along the river we watched a group of Dunlins on the shoreline.

We loaded back up into the bus and continued on to the eastern reclamation fields. At our first pull off we found a few birds familiar to many of us feeding among the Hooded Cranes - three Sandhill Cranes! We continued on and Stephanie spotted a Black-faced Spoonbill with a small group of Eurasian Spoonbills!



For lunch we visited Izumi Syuzou, a soba noodle and sake factory. Sake and Soba are often made in the same location because both require very pure water to produce. We were served hot soba noodles and tempura, with many sake options to sample. After warming our hands and bellies, we headed out for an afternoon at the Izumi-Fumoto Samurai Residences.

As we made our way through the forested hills of Kagoshima and up to the historic part of the town, Bryan explained the history of the samurai in Izumi: During the zero period, Izumi was thought of as a land of lawlessness where samurais ran amuck. Bryan described it as the “wild west of Japan.”

The samurai residence was beautiful. We admired the intricate roofing, which was decorated with the family’s crest. There were secret tunnels built into the house that could be used for women and children to escape during an enemy raid. Carol, Jeanne, and Adriaan all had a chance to try on the formal uniform worn by the samurai, including a sword! In the gardens, we observed Varied Tits and walked along the quaint streets with natural fences of blooming camellias.

For dinner, we went to a yakiniku restaurant. Yakiniku translates to “grilled meat” and each table had a small grill in the center—yum!

Fri., Jan. 10: Yatsushiro Sea Wall | Kōgawa Dam Reservoir

This morning was windy but sunny as we drove about an hour near Kumamoto to a large sea wall in Yatsushiro. On our drive we all had the chance to become more acquainted: We had friends Carol, Penny, Wendi, Carrie and Stephanie, who had met and become close through time spent working and birding together. Our two couples Adriaan and Donna, and Cliff and Lise, brought past experience with international group travel. We had siblings Pete, an avid photographer (and birding friend of Cliff back home), and Jeanne, who was just beginning on her birding journey. Last but certainly not least, our solo traveler, Rena, quickly meshed with the group! This was the first of many drives that allowed us to get to know one another and connect over our shared passions for birds, delicious food and travel!

We spent most of our time at the sea wall scanning the ocean for a variety of gulls and ducks. We got looks through the scope at Saunder’s, Black-headed, Black-tailed, and Vega Gulls. As the tide went out, we also started to see shorebirds including a Common Greenshank, Black-bellied Plovers, Kentish Plovers, and Dunlins searching for invertebrates. A few Ospreys soared overhead or sat perched out above the water. We stood with our backs



to a valley made up of small homes and rice fields, and upon turning around we saw almost two dozen Black Kites soaring near a roost site in the distance. Just before we departed, a flock of Baikal Teals flew past us out over the water, landing once and taking off again.

Our next stop was a stream and dam where, unfortunately, many of the cattails that provided habitat had been removed. We walked to the dam and saw three Eurasian Curlews on the shoreline across the water.

Lunch was at Hirai, a convenience store based mainly around Kyushu and popular for their bento boxes. We headed inland as we ate, driving through the mountainous terrain to the beautiful Kōgawa reservoir.

The sun was out, and we stopped on the bridges to scan for ducks and soak in the warmth. We heard a Red-billed Leiothrix early on and later on saw Mandarin Ducks, two Crested Kingfishers, Tufted Ducks and a Common Buzzard soaring overhead.

Koichi picked us up and we drove to the other side of the reservoir. Jeanne spotted a mammal on the hill as we drove and we were shocked to see a Japanese Badger!

At our next stop on the reservoir, Koichi found two more badger's. They were hiding in a hole, but with a bit of patience we could watch them poke their noses out.

On the coast, we gazed over the open water and through binoculars we could see a Brown Booby coasting low over the waves and Japanese and Pelagic cormorants on a nearby rock. A few of us stopped by the fruit stand and were treated to satsuma oranges and dried persimmons for an afternoon snack.

For dinner we went to a Chinese restaurant with many courses for the table to share! A highlight for many was the black sesame ice cream for dessert. After dinner and our nightly checklist, we retired for the evening to pack up for our northward departure the next morning.

Sat., Jan. 11: Depart Izumi | Views of Mt. Aso | Aso-Yasoen Garden | Flight to Komatsu

This morning Pete and Jeanne departed Izumi early via the bullet train to meet their nephew, who was living in Fukuoka. The rest of our group left Izumi shortly after, also heading north. We stopped a little over halfway at



Mt. Aso, the largest active volcano in Japan. The sky was completely clear and we had breathtaking views of the large volcano and a small cloud of smoke emerging from the top.

We stopped inside the Minamiaso Visitor Center and explored their exhibits on the geology of the area. From the visitor center, we took a walk in the nearby Aso-Yasoen Garden. The first part of our walk was mostly quiet, but as we waited patiently at the edge of the woods, we soon got eyes on a group of Yellow-throated Buntings! Our luck continued to grow when we turned down our next trail. We were met by our first Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers of the tour and at the same moment, Steph spotted a White-backed Woodpecker! We also had plenty of time to watch two Eurasian Nuthatches climbing up nearby trunks and a group of Eurasian Jays on the ground in the distance. Following a group of Asian Tits, we got to observe a dozen or so Long-tailed Tits (whose close relatives we would be seeing in Hokkaidō). At the end of our walk, we had a special treat, the White-backed Woodpecker reappeared briefly before disappearing again into the forest! In a tree overhead, we could see a Japanese (Green) Woodpecker making its way from branch to branch. Our photographers snapped a few more pics before we departed Mt. Aso, heading toward the airport with a quick stop for lunch.

We reunited with Jeanne and Pete again at the airport in Fukuoka this afternoon for our group flight to Komatsu. We arrived just after seven and had a quick dinner at the hotel. Our hotel here provided us with our first onsen (natural hot spring bath) experience. Bryan gave us the low-down on the etiquette of preparing to bathe so we had an idea of what to expect upon entering the onsens. The hot water was a welcome treat for many of us and the start of an exciting new ritual between birding outings for the rest of our trip!

Sun., Jan. 12: Katano Duck Pond | Cape Amagozen | Conveyor Belt Sushi

We had a leisurely breakfast this morning and did not have to go far from the hotel to spot our first birds of the day! In the rice field just across the street, we started the day with multiple Grey-headed Lapwing sightings. Our next stop was a nearby flooded rice field hosting a group of around 350 Tundra Swans. Some waded in the shallow, icy water while others stood along the edges with a foot tucked up under their body feathers to conserve warmth.

Then, we were off to the Katano-Kamoike, (Kamoike translates to “duck pond” in English). We gathered in the observation center building to survey the scene— hundreds of Geese, Teals, and Mallards with a few dozen other species.



It was apparent just looking at the sheer number of birds in a relatively small area that this was a site of great importance for overwintering waterfowl. Bryan helped us to ID the Greater White-fronted Geese, Taiga Bean-Geese and Tundra Bean-Geese at the far end of the pond, which were difficult to differentiate even through the scope. We enjoyed watching the smew diving close by and all of the other action going on so much that we almost missed the Bull-headed shrikes fly into a tree right nearby. Just before we were about to leave, a Mountain Hawk-eagle landed on the far side of the pond and many of the waterfowl flushed from the area. We were able to get scopes on it and admired the sheer size and its black crest standing upright.

For lunch we stopped at a convenience store, where all of us were starting to gain confidence in navigating the many options and finding our “usuals”. Many loved the curry bread, and others opted for the flavorful tofu and edamame bars.

After lunch, we headed to Cape Amagozen, a scenic park with breathtaking views of the turquoise-blue Sea of Japan and snow-capped peaks. From the lookout we could see Japanese and Pelagic cormorants sitting on a large rock in the distance. A Pacific Reef Heron jumped around on a shallow rocky outcrop nearby. Watching this bird as it foraged, paying no mind to the waves crashing over it, was a real treat! Even better, this was Carrie’s 1000th recorded species and a life bird for many of us!

We meandered back to the hotel and as we drove through rice fields, Rena spotted something moving around – a Green Pheasant! We backed the bus up and watched as it occasionally popped its head up, then returned to feeding. The sky was a bit overcast and at first the pheasant looked quite dark, but as we continued to watch, we caught glimpses of the iridescent emerald green characteristic of the feathers of this endemic bird.

We returned to our hotel mid-afternoon for a chance to relax in the onsens before heading to dinner. We ate at an exciting and interactive restaurant, where we placed sushi orders on an iPad at the table and received them via a conveyor belt. Some of us stuck to known favorites, while others branched out and tried local delicacies of uni (sea urchin) and other new foods like nattō (fermented beans).

Mon., Jan. 13: Kenroku-en Gardens | Higashi Chaya District | Shinkansen to Nagano

Today was largely a cultural and travel day. In anticipation of navigating the Shinkansen (bullet train) station, many of us opted to ship our larger bags to future hotels; a relatively cheap and convenient way to lighten our



load. Then, we were off! We drove about an hour from Komatsu to Kanazawa. Kanazawa is the capital of the Ishikawa prefecture and has been designated a UNESCO Creative City of Crafts and Folk Art. Our first stop there was the Kenrokuen Garden, one of the city's well-known attractions. It is dubbed one of Japan's three best landscape gardens, and it definitely lived up to the name.

We parked and got on our rain gear in preparation for the anticipated wet and chilly conditions. We were pleasantly surprised, however, when the skies cleared and the sun came out only a few minutes into our walk. We admired the landscaping, with Lise in particular enjoying the many plant species thoughtfully arranged. The garden was prepped for winter, and Bryan explained the purpose of the aesthetically pleasing ropes positioned over the trees. They are called Yukizuri (meaning snow suspension or snow support) and are conically placed straw ropes that protect branches from heavy winter snow.

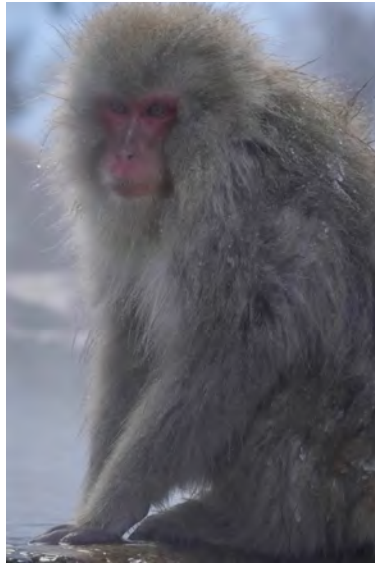
While not necessarily a birding stop, we of course brought our binoculars and had great looks at a Common Kingfisher and a Brambling! We also saw a flock of Varied, Asian, Coal and Long-tailed Tits mingling in a section of pines.

After our time in the gardens, we had a few hours to walk around the historical districts of Kanazawa. The streets were narrow and the buildings were all traditional-style wooden townhouses. It was hard to know what was inside each one, and we were pleasantly surprised by the beautiful ceramics, silks, teahouses and treat stores behind the sliding doors and curtains. In addition to the local handicrafts being sold, some of us tried the gold-leaf ice cream and a Japanese street food called Takoyaki.

For lunch, we headed to the Shinkansen station. Bryan gave everyone some Yen for lunch and we found various options ranging from bento boxes to pastries. The train ride inland was exceptionally smooth and turned what would have been a four-hour drive into a speedy one-hour trip. Upon arrival in Nagano, we checked into our hotel and ate at a nearby restaurant for dinner, where we celebrated Carrie's birthday!

Tue., Jan. 14: Jigokudani Monkey Park | Zenkō-ji Temple

We began the day with a delicious breakfast served on the top floor of our hotel overlooking Nagano city. Then our group departed for the mountains, heading for Jigokudani Snow Monkey Park. Jigokudani translates in English to "hell's valley" and was named long ago due to the steep cliffs and steam rising from all over. We dawned crampons in anticipation of the icy conditions as we started up the mile-long trail to reach the monkeys.



However, once on the trail, winding through the snow-covered trees, what we were seeing was far from hell-ish. We marveled at the beauty of the freshly fallen snow delicately balancing on the branches of a Japanese Sugi Cedars. Although it is not closely related to true pines, it is also commonly called a Japanese Sugi Pine.

The snow monkeys we were heading to see were troops of wild Japanese Macaques. They spend most of the year dispersed, but in the winter, hundreds come together at the hot springs to bathe and eat the seeds provided to them. The scene when we arrived was one out of a movie. There were monkeys everywhere, and thanks to Bryan's foresight of starting off early, we had beaten the majority of the crowd. We spent time watching the Macaques feeding, allopreening and playing. They were completely oblivious to us and photographers had amazing opportunities to document their behavior.

We headed back to the bus, swimming against a near-constant stream of people making their way up the trail. Our next stop was lunch nearby, where we were served our food by a robot! After finishing lunch, we made a quick stop at the hundred-yen store, where some of our group bought dainty ceramics and other home goods for one hundred yen (sixty cents!).

Next was a quick pitstop at Tatsumi park, which provided close views to photograph waterfowl. Then we spent the afternoon at Zenkō-ji Temple, a temple of great significance for the city of Nagano, which supposedly hosts the first statue of Buddha brought to Japan. The temple was made up of three large gates, many buildings and landscaped gardens. In the main hall of the temple, people could be seen rubbing the statue of Nade Botoke (patting Buddha) in the parts of the body they have ailments they wish to cure. Everyone split up at Zenkō-ji, where we had time to walk the grounds at our own pace before having a bit of time to relax in the afternoon.

After our previous dinner plans, a family-run restaurant, called last minute with the flu, Koichi saved the day and found us a nearby Okonomiyaki, or cabbage pancake, restaurant. Our tables had built-in griddles and the servers brought each of us a bowl of all our Okonomiyaki ingredients. We mixed these and placed them on the griddles, setting timers on each side for five minutes. The pancakes were delicious and many of us bought pre-packaged mixes to make them again back home!



Wed., Jan. 15: Matsumoto Castle | Shiojiri Enrei Ojo Park Line | Saku Regulating Pond

We packed up the van and departed Nagano to make our way northeast toward Karuizawa. Snow was expected throughout the mountains, so we decided to wait until the following day to tackle the mountainous terrain home to the Copper Pheasant. That meant our first stop was the famous Matsumoto Castle; one of the top three premier historic castles in Japan. It was a tall, captivating structure with a tiled roof and a large moat surrounding the perimeter.

Bryan had prepped us for what to expect at the castle before heading there, explaining that we might want to double up on socks, as shoe removal was required and the floors could be very cold. Thus, we arrived prepared and eagerly headed inside to begin ascending the many sets of steep, ladder-like stairs.

The Great Keep (Tenshu) of Matsumoto Castle is a magnificent structure, recognized as a national treasure of Japan. It is comprised of five buildings, including the Daitenshu (main keep), Inui Kotenshu (small keep), Watari Yagura (connecting tower), Tsukimi Yagura (moon viewing tower), and Tatsumitsuke Yagura (arquebus tower). The Daitenshu, the grand keep, stands at 29.4 meters and, despite appearing five stories from the outside, actually has six stories inside. Inside of the Daitenshu, it was easy to imagine what it had been like for the samurai as they stood watch - its towers providing amazing views. The entrance below the first floor's main level had wider passages and was referred to as "Musha-bashiri" or "warriors' running passage". It was constructed to allow samurai in full armor to run around the interior defending the castle. The floors were made of wooden planks from centuries old massive trees and some of the walls were lined with guns and intricately made gun-powder cases to tell the story of weapons used during an attack.

On our way out we wandered the gardens a bit and some of us took pictures with a man dressed as a samurai. In the moat near the exit gate, we had our closest Baikal Teal sighting yet. We knew this was a rare opportunity to observe this species up close, since even Bryan pulled out his camera for a few photos. Multiple Common Kingfishers darted back in forth and perched on the stone walls of the moat.

After our typical 7-Eleven lunch stop, we made our way to Shiojiri Enrei Ojo Park Line in the nearby mountains. Although the skies were clear when we arrived with nice views of the valley below, the weather quickly turned and heavy snowflakes started to fall, causing the view of the valley to disappear. The afternoon felt like a snow globe as we continued to walk down the road. The woods were fairly quiet, but we managed to spot a Long-



tailed Rosefinch land in some bushes after flitting across the road. It camouflaged very well, so it was tricky to get eyes on, with Pete describing it as very demure in the thicket.

We made a quick stop at Saku Regulating Pond before checking in at our hotel. The wind had picked up and there were many familiar waterfowl in the small corner of the pond that still had open water. Over 30 Gray Herons stood on the ice looking very cold, and over 100 Black Kites were perched on the ground and in trees, which was a sight to behold!

We checked into the AQA Premium Hotel in Karuizawa, with some of us taking the opportunity to onsen before a relaxing dinner at the hotel.

Thur., Jan. 16: Copper Pheasant | Karuizawa Wild Bird Sanctuary

We were greeted by clear skies this morning as we headed out in search of the illusive Copper Pheasant. Winding down narrow valley roads, we passed a group of our familiar friends, the Japanese Macaque, looking troublesome next to a nearby home. We drove past the Usui Pass, a trail that follows the former railway.

Our first stop was Usui Lake, a man-made lake formed by Sakamoto Dam, which allowed us a break to stretch our legs while taking in the beautiful scenery. After exiting the bus, we quickly found multiple Japanese Accentors in plain sight.

After a quick bathroom break, we were back on the road and continued our descent into the valley. The decision the previous day to put off this search was rewarded when multiple group members spotted a nearby bird well-camouflaged with leaf litter on the forest floor—a male Copper Pheasant! We were in awe as we watched him slowly make his way over logs. His tail feathers were remarkable, and we briefly caught glimpses of his plumage in the sunlight.

It was still early and we had gotten our target bird for the day, so Koichi dropped us off to walk down the winding roads. We listened for birds up above, hearing many Japanese-Pygmy Woodpeckers and Tits. At one point we got glimpses at a Mountain Hawk-eagle soaring overhead through the trees. After much time spent scanning different sections of the river off the edge of the road below, we finally got eyes on at least four Brown Dippers! We watched as they floated down rapids and flew from rock to rock along the riffles.



On our way out, Adriaan spotted a young Japanese Serow right off the road who was surprisingly undisturbed by the bus. Amazingly, we had a few minutes with this fluffy goat-like creature basking in the sun just a few meters from us.

For lunch we went to a large grocery store with many options to choose from and opted to eat it at a nearby shrine.

The sky stayed clear into the afternoon for our walk through the Karuizawa Wild Bird Sanctuary, which had a dusting of snow and beautiful views of Mt. Asama. Koichi brought pockets full of seeds and after a bit of patience at feeders in the park, we had a small number of visitors in the form of Asian and Eurasian Nuthatches. A Great-spotted Woodpecker hung out nearby, moving from tree to tree. We saw a variety of other Tit species during our walk: Coal, Willow, Varied and Long-tailed. We also got lucky with a Japanese Woodpecker spotting and more glances at a Long-tailed Rosefinch.

Dinner was at a very tasty restaurant just a few blocks away from the hotel and Bryan helped us make selections off the menu. After dinner, we met up for a quick checklist before retiring for the evening.

Fri., Jan. 17: Return to Tokyo | Komiya Park | Tama River

This morning, we had breakfast at the hotel before loading up the van and departing for Tokyo. We left the mountains and returned to the Kantō Plain. We arrived at our first stop, Komiya Park in Hachioji, a western city in the Greater Tokyo area. Today was our warmest day of the trip, and we enjoyed the feeling of shedding a layer, even just briefly.

It didn't take long to spot one of our targets, the Japanese Grosbeak, with a few perched in the canopy just above our trail. As we continued on the boardwalk through the park, we got nice views of a Red-flanked Bluetail and soon after Bryan pointed out two introduced Chinese Hwameis on a grassy patch nearby. Under the shrubbery, we could hear the sounds of Chinese Bamboo-Partridge moving in a small group.

Back in the parking lot we watched two Japanese Bush Warblers hop from branch to branch in leafless bush nearby.



We continued into the heart of Tokyo, driving along the Tama river and stopping a few times for short, meandering walks. We watched Great-crested and Little Grebes along the river and Eurasian Coots and a Eurasian Moorhen meandering through the cattails.

We had dinner back at our familiar hotel, the Metropolitan Haneda and packed up for our early morning flight to Hokkaidō.

Sat., Jan. 18: Flight to Kushiro | Tsurui-Itō Tan chō Crane Sanctuary

We headed to the airport again, now familiar and more confident on the monorail. Our flight to Kushiro was quick and we landed at the airport around 10 AM. In flight, we passed over Blakiston's line, a faunal boundary between the islands of Hokkaidō and Honshū that exists for a few reasons, one of them being Hokkaidō was once connected to Russia during the Pleistocene epoch (the last ice age).

Koichi went ahead to get the van and, after loading up the bus, we made a quick stop to check on a potential Ural Owl spot. We were especially glad to have Koichi-san behind the wheel on the winding and icy roads of Hokkaidō.

At the owl spot, we didn't hear anything and continued on, headed for the long-anticipated Red-crowned Cranes. Soon after, we saw our first Steller's Sea Eagle of the tour! Perched in a tree in the distance, we admired the sheer size of this bird. We arrived at the Tsurui-Itō Tanchō Crane Sanctuary and made our way down the slippery road toward the viewing area. About a dozen other people were observing the cranes and there was plenty of room to find a good spot to watch. We spent around an hour there watching them feed, mingle and vocalize. Before leaving, a group of Whooper Swans flew overhead.

We stopped for lunch at a convenience store before hitting the next crane spot.

On the road we spotted a very cute Red Fox with a mangy tail. Bryan checked another Ural Owl roost but didn't see one.

The sunset was much earlier in the north, and the sun was low in the sky not long into our time at the Otowa Bridge crossing the Setsuri River. We birded the river below, seeing Whooper Swans, Red-Crowned Cranes, Great Egrets and our first Hokkaidō subspecies of the Long-tailed Tit, colloquially referred to as the "snow fairy".



Our hotel tonight was Yamahana Onsen Refre; a modest hotel with a community onsen and a surprisingly wonderful dinner!

Sun., Jan. 19: Tsurui-Itō Tanchō Crane Sanctuary | Ural Owl Roost | Nemuro Peninsula

We started off our morning back again with the Red-Crowned Cranes. They were more active this morning with many arriving throughout the hour to join in on the socializing and feeding. We admired their breath, rising as steam from their mouths, as they vocalized to one another.

We departed the crane sanctuary to slowly make our way up to Nemuro. Our next stop was one of the Ural Owl roosts we had checked yesterday and we were pleasantly surprised to find that the bird was out sunning itself this morning at the entrance to the large cavity. We agreed this was one of the best roosting trees we had seen.

Continuing east toward the Nemuro Peninsula, our next stop was a train station to use the bathroom. Our timing was serendipitous as our bathroom break coincided with a steam engine coming through. Dozens of photographers and spectators gathered (us included!) to watch the old-timey train and passengers waving as it pulled away.

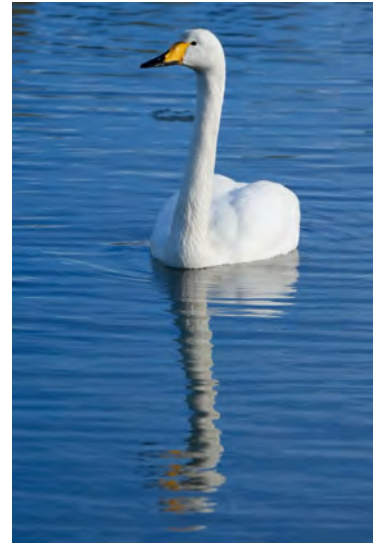
We also had our first squirrel of the trip, an adorable Eurasian Red Squirrel with iconic ear tufts.

We made a few additional birding stops along the coastline and made it to the Shunkunitai Wild Bird Sanctuary in time for sunset. There we saw several familiar species and had amazing looks at the Shiretoko mountains in the distance.

We got checked in and had a nice dinner at the hotel before tucking in for the night.

Mon., Jan. 20: Nemuro Peninsula | Cape Nosappu | Hanasaki Lighthouse

We departed at 8 AM for the easternmost part of Hokkaidō. We stopped first at a few lookouts to scan the ocean, and Bryan helped the group with adult gull identification tips to differentiate between the Slaty-backed, Glaucous-winged, and Glaucous Gulls we had views of. As we continued along the peninsula, we found Spectacled Guillemots, Red-breasted Mergansers, Common Goldeneyes, and some Long-tailed Ducks.



The day was a birding day with a bit of history sprinkled in. We made our way to Cape Nosappu at the tip of the Nemuro Peninsula. There they had built a lighthouse as well as a memorial for the Kuril Islands, which Japan had lost to Russia after World War II.

We found over two dozen species at the lighthouse; some familiar with a few new ones sprinkled in. Scanning the water, we identified Black and Stejneger's Scoters, Spectacled and Pigeon Guillemots, Common Murres and Red-necked Grebes.

We stopped by Onnemoto Hide and scanned the rock formations off the coast with the hope of finding a Rock Sandpiper, but didn't have any luck.

We also had two new marine mammals today: a Sea Otter and Spotted Seal!

Our lunch stop was a convenience store even more exciting than 7-Eleven. It had a variety of fresh pastries made in-house as well as many other a la carte options. We took lunch back to the hotel to warm up and had a bit of time to relax before most of our group headed out to Hanasaki Lighthouse on the southeast side of the peninsula. The views of the coastline at sunset were breathtaking, and "golden hour" allowed for great photographs of the waves breaking on the cliffs at high tide. There were many Harlequin Ducks and we got our first two loon species on the trip: Pacific Loon and Red-throated Loon.

We headed back to the hotel for the evening, where we had dinner, which Cliff mentioned was the best Sashimi he had ever had, followed by our evening checklist and review of tomorrow's plan.

Tue., Jan. 21: Notsuke Peninsula | Yoroushi Onsen

We departed our hotel in Nemuro after breakfast and spent the morning birding along the coast, working our way to the Shiretoko peninsula.

Our first stop was Lake Furen, where we watched Steller's and White-tailed Eagles waiting on the ice near some ice fisherman, hoping for scraps. There were tons of Glaucous Gulls and hundreds of Whooper Swans.

After that we had our last 7-Eleven lunch stop. Everyone picked out what had become their favorites, stocking up on some snacks as well. We drove out to the Notsuke Peninsula and as we ate, it was blowing snow and upon



first glance our prospects seemed bleak. However, it didn't take long until we came across a fluffy Red Fox in the middle of the road. It was very habituated, and as we tracked a Red-throated Loon fishing right off the shoreline from our bus, the fox trotted along behind. We got a quick glimpse of our target species, Asian Rosy-Finch, as a flock flew quickly by. We could not find that group again and continued along in hopes of others. As we drove along, we came across two male Yezo Sika Deer sparring. They paid no attention to us as they fought, heads down.

Not long after, Carrie pointed out a group of birds on the ground up ahead, Asian Rosy-Finches! We pulled up slowly to them and admired their light heads and pink wings as dozens hopped around foraging.

Near the end of the road, we stopped at the visitor center for a bathroom break and to explore their small collection of sheds and glass fishing floats. We headed back out to the mainland and made our way to Yorouchi Onsen, our final hotel of the trip where we hoped to see the endangered Blakiston's Fish Owl.

Upon arrival, the heated floors treated our cold feet as we made our way to the beautiful lobby. A few large couches positioned around an open fireplace near the floor-to-ceiling windows provided great views of the river and feeders just outside. We enjoyed the nuthatches, woodpeckers, and jays at the feeder as Bryan and Koichi got us all checked in. With a bit of downtime before dinner, many of us made our way to the extensive onsens that also overlooked the river. We would catch a glimpse of the Crested Kingfisher who occasionally darted back and forth overhead, vocalizing loudly.

We met for dinner at 5:20 PM to make sure we didn't miss the Fish Owl if it decided to arrive early. At 5:30 PM we made our way over to the most elaborate dinner of the trip so far— they just kept bringing out more plates! After dinner, we returned to the cozy couches to wait. It didn't take long when at 8:37 PM the Blakiston's Fish Owl flew up the river and landed in the large tree across from us before dropping down onto the ledge of the small fish pond. We watched as he spent a few minutes checking out his options before lunging onto his first fish. A few minutes later he lunged again, pulling up a trout with its talons before swallowing it and flying back off into the night.

More members of our group got up very early and had another opportunity to watch it grab a fish around 3 AM.



Wed., Jan. 22: Eagle Cruise | Shiretoko Peninsula | Yoroushi Onsen

While some of our group had been up for a while, we met up for breakfast to enjoy our final full day together. The breakfast at Yoroushi overlooked the river, providing birding opportunities while we dined. A solitary snipe also ate breakfast as it moved along the shoreline of the river. Many of us had views of a Crested Kingfisher flying up-and-down-stream multiple times throughout the morning, and the feeder outside had a nice mix of woodpeckers and tits.

After we ate, we bundled up for our coldest adventure yet and departed for Rausu. The drive passed quickly as we watched the mountains in the east grow closer and closer.

We boarded the Shiretoko Nature Cruise and headed out just a few hundred meters. The captain parked the boat and everyone faced the mountains; a stunning backdrop for the action that was about to ensue. The eagles were waiting in anticipation, with many Slaty-backed and a few Glaucous gulls circling overhead as well. There was a mix of Steller's Sea Eagle and White-tailed Eagle perched on the harbor sea wall.

It didn't take long for the eagles to make their way over to the boat once the crew started chumming. As they tossed individual frozen fish into the water, either a Steller's or White-tailed Eagle would swoop down and snatch it from the surface of the water, with a few going to the gulls. The views of the birds were spectacular, as were the photo ops. Emily even tried her hand at flinging fish out into the water for the eagles to grab! In just about an hour, we managed to see around one hundred eagles, a 50/50 split between the two species. In the trees on a mountainside, even more eagles were visible.

Following the cruise, we stopped at a local fish market and a convenience store for lunch. It was early afternoon and everyone was feeling fulfilled yet cold! We opted to head back to our hotel for late afternoon onsen soaks and to rest before another night of owl watching.

We met back in the same restaurant for another fabulous multi-course dinner. Everyone wore their robes and we managed one final group photo. We gathered again in the lobby after dinner, in hopes we would have the same luck as the night before! A few of us lingered until after midnight, and with no sign of the owl, we slowly retired to our rooms to get some rest and try again in the early morning.



Thur., Jan. 23: Farewell to Cranes | Flight to Tokyo | Goodbyes

More of our group got up very early in hopes that the owl would appear. Our perseverance was rewarded! The Fish Owl arrived to feed not once but twice throughout the early hours of the morning, coming a second time just before sunrise. Wendi and Carol even got a look at it as it flew by from the onsen!

A few hours later we had our final breakfast at Yoroushi Onsen. Many of us had nice views of a small Eurasian Bullfinch flock in the trees across the river.

We made one final stop in Tsurui. In the parking lot across the street, Wendi spotted multiple Goldcrests in a large conifer. After one last look at the cranes, we departed for the airport to head our separate ways. A wonderful send off to wrap up our seventeen nights together in Japan.

Photos: Group (Takumi Koichi - TK), Blakiston's Fish Owl (TK), Red Fox (TK), Red-crowned Cranes (TK), Japanese Snow Monkey (TK), Steller's Sea Eagle (TK), Mandarin Ducks (Pedro Sole - PS), Japanese Cormorant (Adriaan Koolman), White-naped Cranes (TK), Black-faced Spoonbill (TK), Saunders's Gull (TK), Varied Tit (TK), Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker (TK), Black-headed Gull (TK), Long-tailed Tit (TK), Japanese Woodpecker (TK), Group Birding (TK), Mountain Scenic (TK), Blue-rock Thrush (TK), Japanese White-eye (TK), Pacific Reef Heron (PS), Scenic (Mellie Clarence - MC), Tree (TK), Northern Shoveler (TK), Japanese Snow Monkeys (TK), Statue (TK), Gray Herons (TK), Common Kingfisher (TK), Baikal Teal (TK), Matsumoto Castle (TK), Copper Pheasant (TK), Japanese Serow (MC), Eurasian Nuthatch (TK), Red-flanked Bluetail (TK), Long-tailed Rosefinch (TK), Red-crowned Cranes (TK), Japanese Grosbeak (TK), Ural Owl (TK), Mountain Scenic (TK), Red-crowned Cranes (TK), Yezo Sika Deer (TK), Whooper Swan (TK), Scenic (TK), Long-tailed Duck (TK), Blakiston's Fish Owl (TK), Eurasian Jay (TK), Red Fox (TK), Great Spotted Woodpecker (TK), Steller's Sea Eagle (TK), Group (TK), Group (TK), Steller's Sea Eagle (TK)