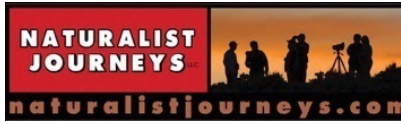
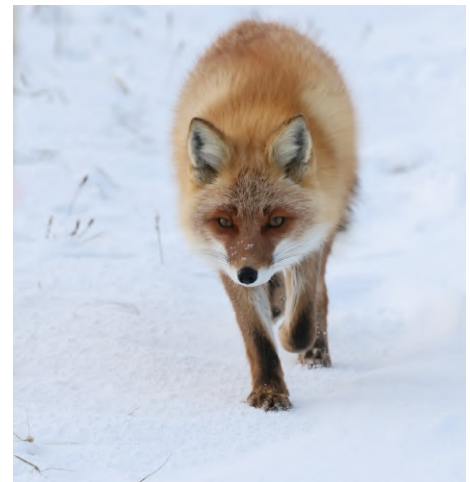


Japan: Birding & Nature | Jan. 7-23, 2026 | Trip Report by Bryan Shirley



With guide Bryan Shirley and participants: Cay, Derek, Cliff, Margaret, Barb, & Stella, + Darren in Hokkaido



January 7, 2026

Introductions and Pre-tour Dinner

Everybody arrived in Tokyo after long but uneventful flights and we met for dinner tonight at a nearby restaurant. Dinner was great and it was nice to hear introductions from everybody. We went to bed excited for the tour to start tomorrow!

January 8, 2026

Flight to Kagoshima | Brown Dipper, Falcated Ducks

Woke up to a cloudless, beautiful morning in Tokyo! The sunrise hitting the distant Mt Fuji was spectacular as we enjoyed our breakfast. Our flight arrived in Kagoshima at noon. We stopped and grabbed some lunch goods and ate at a nearby park with views of active volcanoes on both sides of us – Kirishima on one side and Sakurajima on the other. After lunch we started our drive toward Izumi. Our first birding stop was at the Sendai River. Eurasian Wigeon and Eurasian Coots worked along the edges of the river. We found a Common Kingfisher sitting on a rock on the far side of the river. A little bit further along we wandered around some rural farm roads looking for birds. We stopped on a small bridge over a creek and were surprised to find a Brown Dipper, a nice bird anytime, but especially nice to see one this early in the trip! We watched a Gray Heron following a tractor



and a flock of Siberian Pipits flew in to take advantage of the newly plowed field. We made another stop at the Komenotsu River on the outskirts of Izumi. We watched several Falcated Ducks through the scope – what a wonderful bird! We also had another Common Kingfisher, a Green Sandpiper, and the nearly endemic Japanese Wagtail. This is usually a reliable spot for Long-billed Plover, but today we were about to give up when finally we found one near the dam. For primarily a travel day we did well and had over 30 species for the day. We checked into our unique container style hotel, but we still had a few minutes before sunset, so we took a walk to the nearby Shinto shrine to see the crane statues and the largest bell in Japan. On our way to dinner, we had a Raccoon Dog run across the road but it was fast so only a few of us saw it. We had our first of many Japanese meals tonight, with most of us getting a set that included sushi, tempura, and udon noodles.

January 9, 2026 15,000 Cranes & 6 Species of Cranes!

What a day! We woke up to cold but clear, gorgeous sky today. We headed straight to the Crane Observation Center. It was pretty amazing pulling in and having literally thousands of cranes flying around, flocks of thousands of ducks, and huge numbers of Rooks everywhere! We had just got on the roof and set our scope up when we picked up a Demoiselle Crane feeding in front of the mass of Hooded and White-Naped Cranes. While we photographed and admired the huge numbers of cranes, we also found another rarity, a Swan Goose was in the mix of cranes. A couple of Common Cranes were also present, but it took a while to get everyone on them since they were surrounded by thousands of other cranes. On the other side of the river we added two Sandhill Cranes, our fifth species of crane for the day. All we were missing was the Siberian. Like the Demoiselle, they are not found here most years and we were excited when this one showed up a little over a month ago. We drove the fields birding and did a couple of short walks but the Siberian was nowhere to be seen. Of course, we were seeing lots of other good birds and the other cranes were keeping us entertained of course! On our way to lunch we took a different route to check an area where the Siberian sometimes hangs out and we had heard it was there earlier in the day. When we arrived there were lots of other cranes but no Siberian. We spent about 20 minutes searching the area and were just about to give up and go to lunch when all of a sudden the Siberian flew in and landed! It was so close that we didn't want to spook it so we watched it from the vehicle. Unfortunately, this bird was observed in South Korea in November, where it flew into a power line and broke its leg. The leg has since fallen off just below the knee, but it has been over 2 months now and it seems to be getting along with only one leg.

Lunch today was at the local Shochu (sake) brewery. Free tastings to go with our soba noodles and tempura! In the afternoon we took time to tour an old samurai house and learn about some of the history of the area before driving out to the coast. Our target bird there was Japanese Cormorant, which we easily located. We spent the rest of the daylight looking at gulls in a nearby port, but the highlight was watching the Black Kites, well over a hundred, trying to steal fish as a fisherman loaded crates full of them into a truck!



January 10, 2026 Kogawa Dam | Yatushiro Mudflats

We started the day in the mountains at Kogawa Dam. We just started our walk along the paved road around the reservoir when we got our first birds – strikingly orange and black Varied Tits. We had a nice mixed flock that besides the Varied Tits also included Long-tailed Tits, Warbling White-Eye, Asian Tit, and Ryukyu Minivets. A few hundred Baikal Teal were on the lake. They were pretty shy, but we were able to get nice looks through the scope. Eventually we found two more of our targets here – Mandarin Duck and Crested Kingfisher! It was a beautiful forest and a nice walk.

After Kogawa Dam we drove north to Yatsushiro. We stopped and grabbed lunch goods and headed to a seaside park for a picnic. It was quite warm, but the wind was picking up and the wind had roughed the water enough that even though the tide wasn't high yet there were no visible mudflats. On the far side of the bay we could see some roosting birds though, so after lunch we drove there and explored the area. We located a flock of about 20 Saunder's Gulls, a Southeast Asia specialty, riding out the waves offshore. Later we had many more that were roosting in a rice field. About a hundred winter plumage Black-bellied Plovers were hunkered down in the rocks just above the surf. We drove around the agricultural fields and found a nice flock of Russet Sparrow and several large flocks of Oriental Greenfinch. There were also good numbers of Siberian Pipits in the area as well. With it being Saturday of a holiday weekend here, we knew that everywhere was going to be very crowded so we beat the crowds and had an early dinner of more tasty Japanese food.

January 11, 2026 Travel Day

We had planned on birding at a couple of spots today before our flight, but due to a huge storm coming across the sea of Japan we changed plans and headed straight to the airport. We were able to change our flight and got into Komatsu earlier than planned, but it left us very little time for birding today. As it turned out, our original flight was cancelled so we were glad that we made the change and were happy to be at our new destination safely.

January 12, 2026 10,000 Baikal Teal | Oriental Storks

The weather wasn't great today, but the winds had mostly died down from yesterday so we thought it was a huge improvement. It snowed off and on all day long though, but we had a great day in spite of the weather. We started out driving around the many rice fields in the area and before long found one of our targets for the area, Gray-headed Lapwing. We also found a flock of a couple hundred Tundra Swans near the road and were able to park close by and watch them feeding in the snowy fields. Our main birding area today was Katano Wild Duck Pond. There is a very nice nature center there where we could get out of the cold and look at the thousands of ducks and geese through the large windows. The rangers were doing an official count today and they counted



nearly 10,000 Baikal Teal! They are often hard to see well because they like the far end of the pond, but today there were lots of them nearby as well so we had wonderful views of them. There were also lots of both types of Bean Geese close to the nature center so we could study them until we felt confident that we could tell them apart – not an easy task! We also had five Smew on the pond – the striking black and white males were another favorite bird of the day.

At Amagozen the views of the ocean were pretty crazy with the huge waves from the storm. We were all glad to be on shore and not a boat! The storm had pushed a few birds into the harbor including Red-throated Loon and a Red-necked Grebe. We spent the remainder of the afternoon exploring the many rice fields in the area and were pleasantly surprised to find a pair of Oriental Storks. They were extinct in Japan until a successful captive breeding and reintroduction program. Now numbers are increasing but it is always a treat to see them.

Dinner tonight was a fun experience. We went to a sushi restaurant where your food comes on a conveyor belt. Most of the group loved the sushi and some of the group loved the noodles and French fries, but everyone agreed that it was a lot of fun!

January 13, 2026 Kenrokuen Japanese Garden | Bullet Train

Today was our day to visit Kenrokuen, one of the top three Japanese Gardens in the country. It was built in the early 1600s and designed with the six attributes of the perfect garden (Kenrokuen means Garden of Six Attributes: Spaciousness, Seclusion, Artifice, Antiquity, Waterways & Panoramas). While we admired the views in the garden, of course we were looking for birds as well. A nice mixed flock of tits and other small birds was fun and included about 20 Brambling. We also walked through the park of Kanazawa Castle and spent a bit of time exploring the Higashi Chaya District and admired the old buildings and walkways. Kanazawa station was full of food options and lots of souvenirs, then it was onto the Shinkansen (Bullet Train) for our ride to Nagano. Dinner tonight was Okonomiyaki (cabbage pancakes) and Yakisoba (fried noodles) at a family operated shop with only a few tables. The Okonomiyake was a hit with everyone and fun to experience cooking them at each table.

January 14, 2026 Snow Monkeys | Zenkoji Temple

We woke up today to another beautiful morning – cold but clear with a view of the Japanese Alps from the top floor of the hotel during breakfast. After breakfast we made our way to Jigokudani for the world famous Snow Monkeys (real name is Japanese Macaque). The trail through the forest was a bit icy but not too bad, only a few



sections made us glad that we were prepared with crampons. We arrived early before the crowds got too large and there were monkeys everywhere. We spent the next hour or so enjoying their antics. Some were in the hot spring, some in the river, and many others loafing around or picking food out of the snow. In a corner of the monkey park we called in a pair of Japanese Accentor, one of our target birds for the day.

Lunch was at the nearby restaurant, and our food was delivered by robots! After lunch we birded our way back to Nagano. One stop we made was to look at an impressive flock of at least 200 Dusky Thrushes in an apple orchard. We stopped at a small pond to look at the ducks. It was a pretty good mix and included a couple Baikal Teal. The real treat was in the trees above us though – Japanese Grosbeaks!

From there we drove the rest of the way into Nagano and visited the most famous Buddhist Temple in Japan, Zenkoji. We walked around the temples, birding a bit but mostly admiring the temples. It was only about a kilometer to the hotel, so part of the group decided to explore a bit more on their own and walk back to the hotel.

January 15, 2026 Pallas's Rosefinch | Matsumoto Castle

This morning we said goodbye to Nagano City and headed towards our next destination. Recently rumors of Japanese Waxwing have been spreading, so we started our birding on the shore of Lake Suwa at an area with some mistletoe berries that waxwings love. We talked to other birders as well and the waxwings hadn't been seen yet today. We stayed as long as we could without fouling up the rest of the day but no luck with the waxwings. Our next stop was a mountain road that is closed to traffic in the winter and is a great place for wintering birds. There was a few inches of snow but not bad. We hadn't gone far when we got a great mixed flock with Asian, Coal, Willow, Varied, and Long-tailed Tits. Our main target here was the scarce Pallas's Rosefinch and they performed well – we saw over a dozen during our hike.

After lunch (Curry Rice for some, ramen for others. Creampuffs for dessert for all) we drove to Matsumoto to visit one of the best castles in Japan – Matsumoto Castle. Matsumoto Castle is always a cultural highlight of our tour. The moat had quite a few ducks, but nothing we hadn't seen before except for the resident introduced Mute Swan. After the castle we continued on to our hotel in Saku arriving a bit after dark.

January 16, 2026 Japanese Woodpecker & Green Pheasant

Another cold but clear day today. This morning we headed to the Karuizawa Wild Bird Forest and did a hike looking for forest birds. The hike was nice – a little bit of snow on the shady hillsides but it had melted off a lot of the areas. The trail was a bit icy here and there so we were glad that we were prepared with our yaktrax! We



saw many of the same birds as on our hike at Shiojiri – including all the tits again. There were a few Dusky Thrushes and Japanese Grosbeaks around too. We had a Bryan-only Japanese Woodpecker, and great looks at a Great Spotted Woodpecker. Views of the active volcano that towers over Karuizawa, Mt Asama, were wonderful this morning and it had just a bit of smoke coming out of the left corner. For lunch today we stopped at a supermarket and loaded up on all sorts of tasty goods and ate at a nearby park. The park sometimes gets Japanese Waxwings but they didn't show up today. As a consolation prize a Japanese Woodpecker showed up and we watched it for probably 20 minutes. Since everyone missed the one we had earlier in the morning it was an exciting find.

After lunch we drove to an agricultural area looking for the endemic Green Pheasant and quickly found one in a recently plowed field. We spent the remainder of the afternoon at the Saku Regulating Pond (Toden). Since we did so well in Komatsu, there wasn't a lot of new species here, but it was fun to watch the variety of waterfowl species through the scope in great evening sunlight.

January 17, 2026 4 Woodpecker Species | Lesser White-fronted Goose

We started the day at Karuizawa. We had another guest, Darren joining for the Hokkaido portion of the trip and he rode the train to Karuizawa to bird with us today as well. We picked him up and headed straight to Nagakura Shrine to give the waxwings one more chance. We ended with the same result as yesterday – a few other birds but no waxwings. From there we drove the curvy road down through the mountains from Karuizawa searching for Copper Pheasant along the way. We found a nice flock of tits and woodpeckers and got a Great-Spotted, White-backed, and Pygmy in the same area. We also had a few Japanese Grosbeaks there as well. Near Usui Lake we found a Japanese Woodpecker, completing the grand slam of Honshu Woodpeckers in one morning. We scanned a lot of nice looking habitat, but eventually had to give up on the Copper Pheasant. As we were leaving the area a small flock of gorgeous Eurasian Bullfinch to help us not feel too bad about dipping on the pheasant!

After lunch at a café off the express road, we made the drive into the outskirts of Tokyo and stopped at Sai Lake for a celebrity Lesser White-fronted Goose that has been around for over a month. Beautiful weather in Tokyo meant that the park was packed with joggers, bikers, and lots of others enjoying themselves in the park. The goose was in the exact same spot as it was during our tour a month ago. It is perhaps the most tame Lesser White-Fronted Goose ever and would approach within a few feet of us. Pretty amazing sight.



From there we made the drive through Tokyo via the 18 km long tunnel under the city and arrived at our hotel right at sunset.

January 18, 2026 Hokkaido | Red-Crowned Cranes | Ural Owl

We had our earliest day of the trip today due to an 8:00 AM flight to Hokkaido. We arrived to cold but clear skies. Before long we were on the road and about 30 minutes later we arrived in Tsurumi village and watching Red-crowned Cranes. We visited Tsurumidai sanctuary and there were about 100 cranes in the field. It is hard to explain how beautiful they are in the snow with the sun shining down on them! Lunch was at the café across the street where we all had the “Red-crowned Crane Curry” and watched the feeders. Other than a Great Spotted Woodpecker and a few Tree Sparrows, the feeders were pretty quiet until just as we finished eating a flock of Long-tailed Tits appeared. The Hokkaido Long-tailed Tit is a different subspecies with an all-white head – they are called “Snow Fairies” and thanks to Instagram are world famous.

After lunch we drove through Kushiro Wetlands National Park. The scenery was great and we saw a lot of Sika Deer along the roadsides. We drove to a spot for Ural Owl and located it far from the road, well-hidden in a tangle of branches. With patience and the scope we were eventually able to get nice views. At Otowa Bridge we watched a few cranes coming in to roost and located our first Steller’s Sea Eagle roosting on a far mountain ridge. Tonight we stayed at a traditional Japanese Onsen (hot spring) which hit the spot after being out in the cold all day and the dinner was amazing – possibly the best of the trip!

January 19, 2026 Hundreds of Whoopers, Sea Ducks, Foxes & Sea Otters

We checked out and hit the road headed toward the Southeast Corner of Hokkaido. Our first stop was at Akkeshi where we birded a partially frozen bay. On the far ice there appeared to be a dead deer and there were close to 100 Steller’s and White-tailed Eagles standing on the ice! Whooper Swans swam around only a few feet from us, their loud bugle-like calls ringing out across the bay. We had a rare American Wigeon here as well as lots of Common Goldeneye, a few Smew, and both Red-breasted and Common Mergansers.

Our next stop was on a treeless, wind-swept peninsula called Kiritappu. One of our targets here was Asian Rosy Finches and we quickly found a flock of about 40. At the end of the road we walked a bit to the lighthouse, scanning the sea as we went. We got very distant views of our first Spectacled Guillemot and lots of Black



Scoters and Harlequin Ducks. This area is also good for Rough-legged Hawk and as we were walking back to the van one flew past and eventually landed in a distant pine so we could watch it through the scope.

We made one more birding stop just outside of Nemuro at Shukunitai. Shukunitai is a sand spit blocking the ocean from Lake Furen. The lake was partially frozen and no sea ice was visible yet this year. The scenery here is always nice, especially in the late afternoon light. The disputed Russian Islands were visible in the far distance and the high peaks of Shiretoko visible to the north. Just as we were leaving we spotted some movement on the shoreline and found a flock of about 80 Dunlin. They are the only regular shorebird that can survive here in the winter – most others are much smarter and head to Australia or other warm places!

January 20, 2026 Seabirding from Hides!

It snowed throughout the night – maybe 8-10 inches total. This morning the snow had mostly stopped and blue sky was popping out here and there, but the wind was pretty crazy. Perfect conditions for sea watching! Luckily there are several hides overlooking the sea that we could get to to get out of the wind. We started at the end of the Nemuro Peninsula. From the hide we had a nice view of the disputed Kurile Islands. The ocean was pretty rough so it was a challenge to get everyone on birds in the scope, but it was nice to be out of the wind and it was fun birding. We had several Ancient Murrelets, Spectacled Guillemots, and lots of sea ducks. After a while we noticed we could no longer see the islands, and before long a blizzard hit and we could no longer see the ocean! We hastily retreated to the van and decided this was a good time to check out the museum and gift shop. When the snow stopped we tried one other hide but there weren't a lot of birds there so we headed back to Nemuro for lunch and a break to get warm in the rooms.

In the afternoon we went to Hanasaki Port and the nearby Kurumaishi lighthouse. We had a couple of very close Ancient Murrelets taking refuge from the storm in the port. At the lighthouse we had a flock of Asian Rosy-finches, a flyby of a Snow Bunting (rare in Hokkaido), and found a Pacific Loon from the hide.

January 21, 2026 Sea Ducks & Fish Owls!

The storm cleared out overnight. We left Nemuro following the shore of Lake Furen. The ice fisherman had piled up some fish scraps on the ice on the lake and there were quite a few eagles taking advantage of the free food. On the North end of Lake Furen we located one of our targets, Stejneger's Scoter. We also had a few hundred Brant, but they were not close, even in the scope. We visited Notsuke Peninsula where after nice ramen noodles



for lunch we located a small flock of Common Redpolls. We also were lucky to see a Short-eared Owl hunting along the roadside.

We arrived at Yoroushi Onsen a bit before dark and had a bit of time to check out the river and feeder before heading to our rooms. The onsen (hot springs) were wonderful after a long day in the cold. Dinner was quite the experience tonight. Not sure how many courses, but maybe 15, all beautifully presented. After dinner we moved to the lounge for coffee and ice cream while we did the bird list, then we started our vigil for the Blakiston's Fish Owl. The owl visits the fish pond every night, but sometimes it is quite late and you never know when it will come. Tonight wasn't bad – he showed up at 9:03 PM. What an amazing bird. It caught a few fish and posed for photos for over 20 minutes before flying down the river out of sight. Definitely a highlight of our trip!

January 22, 2025 Rausu Eagle Extravaganza

We started the day with a wonderful breakfast at Yoroushi. The feeder was busy with Eurasian Jays (the Hokkaido subspecies has an orange head!), lots of Nuthatches and both Marsh and Asian Tits. We kept our eyes on the river while we ate and eventually had 2 Brown Dippers come and feed in the stretch just outside our windows.

After breakfast we loaded up and headed back to the coast to the fishing village of Rausu. It is located at the base of the Shiretoko Peninsula and is famous for the wintering eagles. We had a nice lunch, then boarded our boat for a nature cruise. This cruise is primarily to see the eagles, but today we were lucky and got a couple of alcids as well. We had one Thick-billed Murre and then a bit later we had one Crested Auklet – quite a rare sighting here. After cruising around for a bit, we parked the boat offshore and the staff starting throwing scraps of fish into the ocean for the eagles and before long our boat was surrounded by eagles. It was so interesting to watch them maneuver, trying to scoop the fish out of the water before the other eagles. The White-tailed Eagles were quicker and most agile, but the Stellar's would win in a fight and the White-tailed seemed to always be keeping an eye out for them. Another highlight for sure.

Back at Yoroushi we had another great evening, but tonight the owls were hungry! As soon as it got dark a pair flew into a tree across the river. It was nice getting to see them again, plus so early. That meant we could enjoy dinner and the hot springs without worrying about when the owls would come. With the eagles, owls, and the fabulous dinner and onsen, it was a perfect day.



January 23, 2026 Red-crowned Crane | Return to Tokyo

We enjoyed one last morning at Yoroushi and our last views of the Great Spotted Woodpeckers, Eurasian Jays, and tits at the feeders during breakfast. After checking out we headed to Tsurui for more time with the Red-crowned Cranes. We started at Ito Sanctuary where there were close to 150 cranes. We spent about an hour just enjoying the spectacle. It was great when one pair would start to call it would set off a chain reaction with calling and displaying cranes everywhere! We had enough time to stop at Tsurumidai, where we watched the cranes our first day, and there were even more cranes here – close to 200. We stayed as long as we could before we had to head to the airport for our flight. On the way we stopped and grabbed our final 7-11 lunch of the trip and headed to the airport to start our trek home. Getting to spend a bit more time with what could be considered one of the iconic scenes of Japan, the Red-crowned Cranes in the snow, seemed a fitting end to our wonderful trip here.

Photos: Group (Bryan Shirley - BS), Steller's Sea Eagle (BS), Red Fox (Clifford Drowley - CD), Crane Display (BS), Great Crested Grebe (BS), Demoiselle Crane (BS), Siberian Crane (BS), Oriental Stork (BS), Japanese Accentor (CD), Snow Monkey (BS), Japanese Woodpecker (BS), Red-crowned Crane (CD), Ural Owl (BS), Red Fox (CD), Scenic (CD), Japanese Cormorant (BS), Ancient Murrelet (BS), Sika Deer (CD), Long-tailed Duck (BS), Short-eared Owl (CD), Blakiston's Fish Owl (CD), Steller's Sea Eagles (CD), Blakiston's Fish Owl (BS)