Japan 2018

3rd - 19th February

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Japan: February 3rd - 19th 2018

Honshu, Kyushu, Hokkaido

by Nick Bonomo, Julian Hough, Dave Provencher

This somewhat last-minute birding trip to Japan was spurred by an announced change in Nick’s work schedule, one that would make taking long trips a bit more logistically difficult for him. Eager to sneak in one more trip before the change, Japan in February seemed the logical choice. Julian Hough and Dave Provencher were enthusiastically on board with this idea, and the three of us began planning in November, just three months from departure. This trip would promise quality birds, photographic opportunities, and a unique cultural experience. None of us had visited Japan before.

We decided to hit what seem to be the top 3 Japanese birding islands at this time of year, which are, from south to north: Kyushu, Honshu (Tokyo), and Hokkaido. Okinawa is also quite popular, but we did not have time for that. As most international flights from the US go through Tokyo, we began and ended our trip on Honshu. In short, we went from Honshu to Kyushu to Hokkaido and back to Honshu.

We have left out some of the basics for this trip report, i.e. things that are repeated over and over in previous reports on Cloudbirders and other sites. Stuff like the major targets for each island, etc. We assume a basic knowledge of a “Japan in Winter” trip. The free itineraries provided by the pro tour companies (Field Guides, WINGS, VENT, Tropical Birding, etc.) will be enough to get you on the right track if you know nothing about winter Japanese birding.

Prices quoted in this report are in USD unless noted otherwise.
Itinerary:

Feb 3 - Depart JFK late afternoon

Feb 4 – Arrive Tokyo (HND) 9:10pm local time

Feb 5 – Karuizawa

Feb 6 – Early Karuizawa, midday Snow Monkeys, PM drive back to Tokyo, board Miyakejima ferry

Feb 7 – Ferry pelagic with brief stop at Hachijojima Island, ferry back to Tokyo, arrive Tokyo evening

Feb 8 – Fly HND>KOJ, drive towards Izumi, birding at Sendai River en route, Arasaki PM

Feb 9 – Arasaki, Kogawa Dam

Feb 10 – Arasaki early, then Yatsushiro

Feb 11 – Lake Miike, Kota Ponds, Sadowara, drive back towards KOJ for the night

Feb 12 – Fly KOJ>KAH, Otowa Bridge, drive to Yoroushi Hot Spring

Feb 13 – Yoroushi Hot Spring, Shari, to Rausu

Feb 14 – 9am eagle boat from Rausu, PM birding Shiretoko peninsula

Feb 15 – Notsuke Peninsula, Nemuro Peninsula

Feb 16 – 9am Habomai alcid boat, Nemuro Peninsula

Feb 17 – Cape Kiritappu, Biwase, Lake Akkeshi, Otowa Bridge, Tsurui Red-crowned Cranes, fly KUH>HND

Feb 18 – (Julian flies home) Tokyo East cleanup (Chiba/Ibaraki)

Feb 19 – Dave & Nick fly home

General Impressions:

Japan is often described as an expensive place to travel. While we wouldn’t call Japan cheap by any means, it is not prohibitive. This is all relative, though; there are many travel styles out there. If you must travel dirt-cheap and prefer to camp, visiting Japan in February is not your thing. One of the factors that helps us reduce the cost of birding trips is room sharing. On birding trips we think nothing of cramming four of us into a motel room. This saves a good deal of money. Part of what makes Japan more difficult to afford is the inability to cost-share lodging because they charge per person for lodging! This was disappointing, but we had no choice. To make up for the lodging expense, if you can pull off a sweet airline or credit card point redemption, you can save a large chunk of change by getting a free flight.

The petty theft rate in Japan is ridiculously low. We are used to constant paranoia while traveling with expensive gear, but Japan is so safe that we never broke a sweat. Turns out the greatest threat to our gear was ourselves (…Dave…). It’s always a good idea to keep valuables out of sight, but you don’t have to worry so much in Japan. It was a nice change of pace.

Basic Planning:

It is recommended that one plans for this trip 6+ months in advance, particularly for the Hokkaido portion, as lodging is scarce in some areas, and advance reservations are needed for the Blakiston’s Fish-Owl lodges. When you begin to book this trip, start with Hokkaido for this reason. We were just barely able to secure the lodging we needed on Hokkaido, and it took a slight rearrangement of the initial itinerary to make that work. The Honshu and Kyushu legs can be done later, as you aren’t specifically looking to get into birder lodges there, and places to stay are both cheaper and more abundant.

Basically all of your winter target species can be seen anytime from Dec–Mar. A late winter visit has its advantages, namely 1) longer days, 2) greater chance of pack ice close to Hokkaido, 3) waxwing and finch irruptions often peak at that time, and 4) a winter’s worth of rarity intel is available.
Flights:
The three of us were able to get direct flights from JFK to Tokyo on ANA, one of the two major international Japanese airlines (ANA/All Nippon Airways and JAL/Japan Airlines). Nick scored an awesome mileage redemption deal by transferring 40,000 AmEx points to ANA, then redeeming those miles for the entire round-trip ticket. Julian was able to use points via a different transfer method. Chase Rewards VISA points from the Chase Sapphire Preferred VISA card can be transferred to airline partners on a 1:1 basis immediately over the phone. United is a travel partner with Chase. ANA is a travel partner with United. Julian was able to transfer 70,000K points to United's Mileage awards program to book an award seat on the same ANA flight. Much more economic than using the points as cash to purchase the seat. Dave paid cold hard cash. We all ended up on the same flight out despite the three different booking methods; Julian had to return one day before me and Dave.

For the internal flights we used the ANA Experience Japan fare, which cost us USD$100 for each flight ($400 total per person). See the website for criteria, but this is a deal for visiting foreigners only. JAL has a similar offer, but the ANA flights fit our itinerary better.

ANA Experience Japan fare:

Our ANA flight experiences were all positive. Our flights were well-timed and lucky to avoid poor weather, so we experienced no delays of any consequence. Our final internal flight, from Hokkaido to Tokyo, was only briefly delayed as it came on the heels of a minor snow/wind storm.

Lodging Reservations:
We primarily used Booking.com and Japanican.com to book lodging. We booked pretty much every night in advance, but we did need to use the booking.com app via smartphone to find last-second accommodations for one night on Kyushu.

Rental Car Reservations:
We used Tocool! and Japan Experience for rental car bookings. All rentals went very smoothly. Remember that you need an International Drivers License to rent a car in Japan. These can be purchased at AAA offices in the US. Note for non-US residents: the International Drivers License MUST BE obtained in a country signatory to the Geneva Convention. I mention this because we came across a group of Hungarians that were not aware of this until they arrived in the country and were denied their rental car. Ouch! Be sure to read the fine print and make sure your license will be honored in Japan. Additional drivers are free of charge.
When you pick up your car, be sure to ask for an ETC card to be placed in the vehicle; this is an electronic card that will rack up your tolls as you drive. The balance is then easily paid off to the rental company when you return the vehicle. I think they do ding you a few bucks for the ETC card rental. Note that we did NOT come across any tolls on Hokkaido, so we did not need the ETC card for that island. We ended up paying about $150 in tolls combined ($50 on first Honshu visit, $50 on Kyushu, $0 on Hokkaido, and another $50 for the second Honshu leg).

Also make sure that they set up your GPS menu to be in English (or whichever language you prefer). The GPS units are a breeze to use thanks to a neat feature that we do not have here in America: all you have to do is enter the phone number of your destination, and the GPS will take you there. They have linked phone numbers and addresses. It’s that easy. Knowing this, I (Nick) compiled in advance a list of phone numbers for quick reference so that time was not lost trying to look up phone numbers on the go. For those places that do not have a phone number, i.e. a random observation point along the coast, I picked nearby business locations to at least get us in the ballpark.

I also made a Google Map for smartphone use. For navigation we honestly used this map as much or more than the vehicle's GPS. The phone technology really is amazing. You can view instructions on how to do that for an iPhone here (I am told this mostly applies to Android phones also):


Speed limits in Japan are low as compared to the US. I took the liberty of going 10-15 km/h over the speed limit and did not get nailed with any violations, but speed at your own risk! Local law enforcement is said to be very letter-of-the-law, so there is no talking your way out of a fine. Luckily we did not have to put that reputation to the test!

**Language:**

English is not spoken by many people outside of the cities. Even in our limited urban time, English-speaking was scarce. Lucky for us, Dave spent a few months beginning to learn Japanese! His knowledge no doubt saved us from many misunderstandings along the way. We also used Google Translate with some success when we needed to.

**Smartphone data:**

For a trip this long, we decided that getting some sort of local data plan for our phones would be most helpful. Dave researched and rented a Pocket WiFi router via eConnect. This cost us $85 for 18GB of data at 4G speed, which was plenty for the entire trip. Here’s how it works: the router, about the size of a large cell phone, picks up the cellular data signal and functions as a WiFi hotspot. So all three of us simultaneously had mobile internet access as long as we were within several feet of the router. Dave arranged for the device to be waiting for us at our first hotel, and he then dropped it in the mail for return at the airport before we flew home. Easy peasy. It worked beautifully. We only seemed to lose service when driving through the mountains, as I recall.

Also, we highly recommend topping up your Skype account with $5 to be able to make calls offline to hotels and ferry companies that would not be in your WhatsApp contacts. We found this invaluable, and luckily Nick had a small amount of credit on his account that enabled us to call and check Ferry sailings and calling for Hotel shuttles.

**Weather and Clothing:**

Average high and low temps during a given month for each area are readily accessible online. Hokkaido and Karuizawa are quite frigid, Tokyo less so, and Kyushu is far enough south that accumulating snow rarely falls at low elevation (there can be issues at higher elevations on Kyushu, however). We packed for brutally cold conditions and were ready with rain gear. If we were to come across a warm day on Kyushu, all we would have to do is drop a few layers.

Between the coastal seawatching, the boat trips, and a nighttime owl vigil, there were plenty of opportunities to freeze our cojones off. In addition to long basal Under Armour and pants/jeans, in the coldest conditions I also wore ski/snowboard pants. Not only were the snowboard pants very warm, but they broke the wind and were waterproof. They will be a regular addition to my local winter birding from now on.

For footwear I opted for my old low-cut hiking shoes, but they are not waterproof anymore, even after treatments. For waterproofing this trip, rather than buying a new pair of boots, I purchased NEOS overshoes, which cost me $70 on Amazon. They could double as marsh boots back home. [https://www.overshoesneos.com/Neos_Adventurer_Overshoe.html](https://www.overshoesneos.com/Neos_Adventurer_Overshoe.html).

Not cheap, but they slide easily over my shoes and, most importantly for this trip, they pack down small and very light. Back home I have been using them in place of my old rubber boots for slogging through water and mud, and they have worked well so far. Not as clunky as I feared they might be. Their major limitation is that I have to remove my right overshoe for driving, as it is just not safe to drive with those on; you lose too much feel for the pedal with the extra sole. I believe that Julian and Dave wore waterproof boots.

Anyway, the key to a comfortable winter Japan trip is staying dry and warm. Being properly dressed made all the difference, and disposable hand and toe warmers also helped with that.
Food/Drink:
It was not difficult to find food in Japan, even on Hokkaido. The presence of convenience stores (7-11, Seicomart, etc) in every little town made quick meals easy.

Many lodging establishments include some sort of breakfast, but for those that did not, or if we were departing too early, we would stop at a convenience store for food and caffeine. Those same convenience stores also came in handy for lunch; daylight is limited in February and we did not want to waste time eating a meal in the middle of the day. Many lodges/hotels also include dinner, but for those that do not, most towns have some sort of sit-down restaurant for a real meal to cap a long day’s birding.

Julian can tell you that it’s not easy to be a vegetarian in Japan unless you eat fish. Even the vegetable-based meals are regularly topped with bonito (fish) flakes. He traveled with a prepared statement in Japanese explaining that he did not eat meat of any kind. It seemed to work out pretty well for him, save for a few mystery meals. Ju adds “It definitely takes the stress out of being the ‘difficult’ one at meal times after a hard day’s birding knowing you can communicate easily. Most places were accommodating and the soup bowls, often made with Dashi fish stock were not fishy tasting and incredibly tasty.”

Money:
Upon arrival to the airport we each retrieved Japanese yen from an ATM using our BANK DEBIT CARD. Since there are the usual charges, in hindsight we would have taken out more money initially to reduce the amount of transaction charges when we got home. The two places we withdrew money was in 7-11s and Post Offices. We had heard mixed things about credit card acceptance in Japan, but we found that nearly everywhere took credit (Nick used MasterCard everywhere without issue). Make sure that your card does not apply foreign transaction fees. Stores did not have minimum purchase amounts for credit card use, so we charged every little thing, even a $2 snack at a 7-11. Always a good point to call both your bank and credit card company ahead of time and alert them to your travel plans so they don’t flag and put a hold on your card.

Where To Find The Latest Bird Reports:
The Kantori group on Facebook was a great source of information for us regarding sightings leading up to the trip, in addition to being a resource for the few logistical puzzles we could not solve ourselves. The local members were very helpful, and visiting birders were posting updates from their trips as well. Note that the former home of the Kantori group was Yahoo; the Yahoo version is still open to join, but it is almost never used anymore because all activity has shifted to Facebook.

eBird is not used much by Japanese birders, but it is being used more and more by visitors, so check that out as well. We eBirded our entire trip and encourage you to do the same! We are including links to some of our more significant eBird checklists in the daily summary below.

Meals on display; beer and whiskey from vending machines; my cheat sheet for avoiding meat and fish and the best thing in Japan – heated toilet seats – everywhere! (JH)

Hot coffee in a bottle – the perfect start to most mornings! (JH)
HONSHU PLANNING:
Our three “must-dos” for Honshu were: the town of Karuizawa, Snow Monkeys in the Japanese Alps, and the Miyakejima ferry from Tokyo. We did all of that in a few whirlwind days at the start of the trip. Also, as Dave and I would be in Tokyo for one day at the end of the trip (Julian flew home one day before us), we spent the last day cleaning up a few desired species east of Tokyo.

Some birding tours go all the way to the west coast of Honshu (Kanazawa/Kaga), which does add a few cool birds, but had to be cut from our itinerary due to time constraints. The main draw to that part of Honshu happens to be waterfowl, but we were actually able to find those targets elsewhere on our tour, which was a bit unexpected and perhaps lucky. I’m talking both bean-geese, Greater White-fronted Goose, Bewick’s Swan, and Baikal Teal. Also expected on that side of the island are Gray-headed Lapwing and Japanese Green Pheasant, both of which we did not see on this trip. You still have a decent shot at the pheasant by cutting western Honshu, but you won’t get the lapwing.

Looking back on it now, scheduling one more day around Karuizawa would have been prudent. I’m not sure where we would have made up that time elsewhere, but many of the Karuizawa targets are scarce and require some combination of time and luck to find. A very short visit, like ours, will often lead to some misses there.

It was not difficult to find affordable lodging in Karuizawa using www.booking.com.

There are multiple ways to handle transportation from Tokyo to Karuizawa. The two most popular methods are to either rent a car in Tokyo and drive to Karuizawa from there, or take public transport (Shinkansen) from Tokyo to Karuizawa, and then rent a car in Karuizawa itself.

Due to our rushed Karuizawa visit, we had to maximize birding time there. Our nighttime arrival into HND meant that if we took the public transport option to Karuizawa we would miss several hours of early morning birding, because trains do not run all night to Karuizawa. We did not have the luxury of missing morning birding, so we were forced to rent a car in Tokyo upon arrival and drive ourselves. This was not a problem except that we could not reserve an SUV with snow tires to rent in Tokyo (those vehicles are said to be easy to rent in Karuizawa since they are used to lots of snow there). The best we could do was an AWD Subaru crossover with all-season tires. Turned out this was fine, as we did not hit any inclement weather while there.

We twice rented cars from Nippon at Haneda Airport (via Tocool!), which, by the way, is conveniently located a block away from the Haneda Inn (booking.com) and operates 24/7.

The Izu Islands ferry was our next logistical hurdle on Honshu. The ferry website is here: www.tokaikisen.co.jp/english/island/miyakejima/

You can navigate their website for updated timetable, fare, and booking information.

Based on what we saw, you do not need to book the ferry far in advance at all. It is not a popular route during the winter. You could probably book as a walk-on, at least for the low-end cabins that we chose. We went with the bunks, which is one step up from sleeping on the floor. I thought they were great.

KYUSHU PLANNING:
I think the best way to do Kyushu is to fly in and out of Kagoshima and do a loop. This was by far the easiest island to plan logistically. Lodging is easy to find via the online search engines, and you generally don’t have to worry about booking an AWD/4WD vehicle because snow is scarce this far south. Of course you will read the occasional trip report of a cold spell with some snow/ice, but this seems uncommon. The one piece of the Kyushu puzzle we could not book ourselves was the Japanese Murrelet boat out of Kadogawa. The boat captain does not speak English so could not take reservations from us. Takeyoshi Matsuo of Hokkaido was kind enough to book this for us (see immediately below for Take’s information).

HOKKAIDO PLANNING:
Start with Takeyoshi Matsuo (AKA Take-san, AKA Matsuo-san)! Take is the owner and operator of Minshuku Furen (AKA Furen Lodge), a birder’s lodge located near the base of the Nemuro Peninsula at Lake Furen. As far as birders are concerned, Take is Mr. Hokkaido. He is up on the latest local reports and has a wealth of information to share.

You can contact him at matsuo-t@plum.plala.or.jp

We began by emailing Take and booking two nights with him. From there, he helped us book both the Eagle and Alcid boat trips.

You will have a choice between 5am and 9am Eagle boats out of Rausu, or both if you wish! The 5am boat is meant to be out for sunrise light (if you get a sunny morning). We took the 9am trip on a bright day and still found the light to be fine. If you are lucky, there will be sea ice close to shore and you will get views of eagles on the ice floes. We did not have any ice nearby, so we had to settle for eagle feeding on the water just outside the harbor itself. We still had an incredible experience despite the lack of sea ice. Definitely do this tour with or without ice. If there is ice, the trip costs 10,000 yen and is 2 hours long. If no ice, the trip is 7,000 yen and 90 minutes long.
For photography on the eagle boat, these birds are often CLOSE. My 400mm lens was too much for the bulk of the action. I had a cheap kit lens that I was using for the feeding sessions. Not ideal. Julian and Dave had lenses in the 70-200mm range with which they had great results.

There are two options for Alcid boats out of the Nemuro Peninsula: Habomai and Ochiishi. Take-san can set you up with either. We took the Habomai boat (5,000 yen). Results were mixed. On one hand, we had fine views of several alcid species…much better looks than the distant scope specks we were seeing from land. However, the captain basically skirted along the coast and refused to take us closer to the Japanese/Russian border off Cape Nosappu where alcid numbers were higher and we would have had a greater chance of more variety. Seas were calm with a light breeze, so conditions had nothing to do with it. On top of that, we ended up in the harbor some 20+ minutes before we were scheduled to return. For an expected two-hour tour, that’s a good chunk of lost time. Given those frustrations, if I were to return, I would try the Ochiishi boat instead.

Perhaps the most advanced bookings you will have to make for the entire trip are the Blakiston’s Fish-Owl lodges. You have two choices: Yuyado Daiichi at Yoroushi Hot Spring, or Washi-No-Yado just north of Rausu.

Each of these places stock a tiny fish pond adjacent to the natural streams that run through their properties. If you are lucky, the owl will visit said pond at night and catch a fish or two.

Yuyado Daiichi is an exquisite onsen ryokan (traditional hot spring Japanese Inn) that really should be experienced. It’s way nicer than any birder’s lodging should be. We knew it would be the most comfortable night of the trip, but we were all floored by just how cushy it was. It cost us $133 per person for our night here, so it was the most expensive night of the trip. Highly recommended, apparently superior to Washi-No-Yado in every way except for the photography. The photography here is through a glass window. On the upside, you are toasty and warm and sipping the beverage of your choice while waiting for the owl to feed (which may happen soon after sunset, or may not happen all night!). But shooting through a glass window was not ideal, especially since there can be reflection/glare on the windows that further distorts images. One other thing to consider is that one of the pair (male?) has a distorted pupil which doesn’t look great in photos. Coupled with the lighting, the photo opportunities at Washi-Yo-Nado produce much better images than the ones at Yoroushi. But, the experience of staying here, was incredibly enjoyable and we would recommend both places.

Washi-No-Yado is the “classic” location that you’ll read about in most trip reports. We were not able to stay here because it was booked up, but we were able to reserve a spot in the observation room for that evening. As far as we were told, the accommodations here are very basic. It used to be a cheap place to stay, but we understand that prices have increased to the point that it is no longer much cheaper than Yuyado Daiichi. Anyway, the observation room is adjacent to the dining hall and overlooks the stream where the owls come to feed. They allow those who are not staying at the lodge to watch from the obs room until midnight for a modest fee of 3,000 yen ($27) per person. Here, when the sun goes down, the plastic that covers the open windows is rolled up so that you can shoot without anything in your way. Be warned that it is COLD. Standing still for hours at a time in temperatures well below freezing will take its toll after a while, so come prepared. It’s honestly a bit of a shit show with everyone crammed into a tight space…there isn’t much organization here at all. At least the photo ops are better than at Yoroushi, so it is worth it.

**Owl Photography Tips from Julian:**

**Yoroushi**

Due to some of the issues mentioned above, it is important to be aware that lighting is more restricted at Yoroushi, coming from one light from the right, so that equal lighting on the face is difficult to achieve. Glare can also have an effect, so positioning yourself to...
exclude reflections is a consideration, even though the staff will turn off the main room lights when the bird appears. Also, it is important to have a small lens, since the bird is very close here. Julian used a 70-200 lens. Anything bigger than this will not be optimal.

**Washi-No-Yado**

LED-type lights give good illumination here but since these are pulsed strobes, it is important that your camera is set to manual and that your speed settings are set to coincide with the light pulses. So you have to set your shutter speed to 1/80s @ f4 ISO 3200 or f5.6 @ 6400. Although 1/80s seems slow, the strobes act like a flash and freeze the action. If your camera is set to use Auto ISO, your exposures will vary between some frames due to the pulse of the strobes. There are instructions posted on the wall inside the observation room.

We recommend booking both places if you can afford it. We did one full night at Yoroushi and the Obs room at Washi, and we scored on the owl both evenings. Stay as many nights as you can to lessen your chances of an excruciating dip. There are nights when no owls are seen, so there is no guarantee. For those looking for a more natural experience, there is a site near Furen Lodge where Blakiston’s Fish-Owls might be experienced without any feeding by humans. As this is a very sensitive species, I will not include it in this report. Take-san would be the one to ask about that site. We did not go there, but I do know that both tape playing and lights/torches are forbidden; it is not a site for photography.

*Blakiston’s Fish Owl, Washi-Yo-Nado (JH)*

*Washi-Yo-Nado Blakiston’s set-up. Much more frigid and non-luxurious compared to Yoroushi! (JH)*
DAY-BY-DAY SUMMARY (all checklists are available on eBird; select checklist links included here)

February 3:
We departed JFK (New York) mid-afternoon on ANA Flight NH109. There were many empty seats in coach, so we were able to spread out. A long flight, but not unbearable. Included beer and wine didn't hurt.

February 4:
We arrived on-time or early to HND in Tokyo and went to the courtesy desk for our shuttle to the off-site Nippon Rent-A-Car. The shuttle was held up, and the agent told us that we would be taken there via taxi instead. A 5-minute drive later and we were at the rental agency, where our car was being prepared for pickup. The rental agency paid for the taxi. Moments later we were in our rental car. We had booked lodging about 45 minutes to the northwest, en route to Karuizawa, at the Flexstay Inn Ekoda. The first drive of the trip was uneventful. After some major confusion with parking instructions due to language barrier, we eventually found our way to our room. We crashed for a few hours before it was time to rise and find some birds.

February 5:
Up and out early with a goal of getting to Karuizawa, which was about 2 hours away, for first birdable light. We arrived at 6:45am to bright blue skies and zero wind. We began birding along the Kose-Rindo Road at the Wild Bird Forest with our biggest targets being Japanese Waxwing and Copper Pheasant. This was an invasion year for the waxwings, and small numbers had been seen here for a few weeks. It did not take long for us to spot our first few JAPANESE WAXWINGS in trees over the road. The mistletoe berries along this road had kept them pretty reliable here. The ticks kept coming in the form of DUSKY THRUSH, VARIED and JAPANESE TITS, and JAPANESE WOODPECKER.

Continuing our chicken search, we took to the trails. A quick look at a WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKER was nice. Alas, no pheasant.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42505583

Around midday we opted for a change of scenery and went to the Shiotsubo Hotel to watch the feeders for JAPANESE ACCENTOR. This is THE place to see that bird in winter. We walked inside to watch the setup through the windows, and we had an accentor on the ground around the feeders almost immediately. The feeders were pretty quiet otherwise, so we did not linger. On our way out of the property we had nice looks at our first JAPANESE GROSBEAKS and our first couple PALE THRUSHES.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42505587

The habitat behind the famous 7-11 would be our next stop. We arrived to find a large area of new construction behind said market, so we were unsure if some/most of the habitat had been trashed or not. (We still do not know the answer to that question). Anyway, it was birdy enough regardless. More JAPANESE GROSBEAK, many ORIENTAL GREENFINCH, and our first HAWFINCH were coming to a feeder setup at the residences in back. Further back there is a slope of woodland with a stream that runs through it. Julian went to check it out and flushed a SOLITARY SNIPE from the stream. We had a heck of a time relocating it, but eventually we did. It had joined a second individual, and they both flushed back towards the original bird’s section of stream. We actually had nice flight looks as they doubled back past us.

A few buntings in the area included RUSTIC and MEADOW. Among the common Dusky Thrushes were two WHITE’S THRUSHES along the stream. A CHINESE HWAMEI (introduced) picked through leaf litter on the hillside.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42507072

With not much light left, we would give the ISAK fields west of town a shot, with an eye out for rosefinches and Japanese Green Pheasants. Other than some stellar views of MEADOW BUNTINGS in evening light, it was very quiet here.

Night at Karuizawa Pension Sato no Nukumori, which took a while to find due to a map error (forget if it was the car GPS or Google Maps in the wrong). Cheap room was just fine for our needs.
February 6-7:
There was a very light snowfall overnight, just enough for an atmospheric coating, but we awoke to fine birding conditions. This morning we would hit some familiar locations in search of the birds we missed yesterday, most notably both pheasants and rosefinches. This was actually quite a poor winter, up to this point, for rosefinches. Long-tailed Rosefinch, normally reliable around Karuizawa most winters, seemed far scarcer locally than we were expecting. And there had been zero reports of Pallas’s Rosefinch, which is an irruptive species that is often missed. We did not even sniff a rosefinch and again dipped on Copper Pheasant. We spent the first few hours of the morning returning to the Kose-Rindo Road/Wild Bird Forest followed by the 7-11. The highlight of the morning was probably the JAPANESE SEROW that we spotted skulking in the forest.

It was soon mid-morning, and our Karuizawa birding was over. We had to settle for a few misses here, perhaps not surprisingly given the brevity of our visit. We departed the town for the Jigokudani Monkey Park. Seeing Japanese Macaques (“Snow Monkeys”) was a priority for us, so we would spend the early afternoon with them. En route we encountered a roadside group of five more JAPANESE WAXWINGS. Later, driving through an orchard-laden valley, we encountered a few flocks of AZURE-WINGED MAGPIES, the only ones we would see on this trip. Jigokudani itself was birdless midday. We took the half-hour long walk to the springs to find the monkeys – a whole lot of them – cavorting through the valley. The place has a very touristy feel, especially with there being so many, um…tourists. This is what we expected at midday, though. It was recommended that we arrive early, at park opening to beat crowds, which would have been wise if we had not needed that morning to bird. Still, this was an experience we would highly recommend. The macaques were abundant and tame, but they did not interact with the humans, which was a relief. They were doing their thing…bathing, grooming, eating, drinking, etc. If you plan on taking photos, a long lens will do you no good. Our second SEROW of the trip, this one more in the open, was a nice treat.

Before we knew it, it was time to leave. We could not afford to linger because we were about to embark on the most logistically challenging and stressful portion of the itinerary. We had to drive back to Tokyo, return the rental car, get transport to the train station near the ferry terminal where we would store our large bags, and hope to catch the ferry in time. It was a scramble!

To make a long story short, Julian drove expertly through and around traffic to get us into Tokyo at a time that gave us a good shot at making the ferry. We had overStayed a bit with the monkeys, which put us behind the eight ball. The trickiest part would be getting ourselves from the car rental location to the Hamamatsucho train station in a timely manner. We had initially planned on taking the subway, but we were feeling very tight on time and decided it would be faster to take a taxi. Explaining our predicament to them, the folks at Nippon Rent-A-Car called us a taxi. It was expensive ($50!), but it got us to the train station with enough time for us to find the luggage lockers. We would take only small packs on the ferry, leaving our big luggage behind. Each large locker fit one large suitcase. Lucky for us, there were three empty ones available. Quantities seemed limited, though, so be warned, especially if visiting during a busy time of year. Cost was 600 yen per large locker per calendar day, so when taking the overnight ferry, you will find you need to add an extra 600 YEN...
to retrieve your bag. From the train station we walked to the ferry terminal, picked up our tickets, and grabbed a small dinner while we waited for boarding.

Once on the Tachibana-maru we found our way to the Special 2nd Class Cabins, which were bunks arranged in rows. These were not private rooms, but they may as well have been, because we had an entire row of bunks to ourselves. There were few passengers on board this large ship.

We had each purchased two one-way tickets: Special 2nd Class cabin from Tokyo to Miyakejima (nighttime), and 2nd Class cabin for the ride back (during the day). The 2nd Class cabin was merely divided floor space. As we would be seawatching from the deck on the way back, we did not need any sort of comfy sleeping situation and took the cheapest option for that leg.

Our plan was to sleep in the bunks overnight, disembark upon arrival at Miyakejima at 5am, bird Miyakejima for a few endemics (Izu Thrush, Owston's Tit, “Izu” Japanese Robin, and Japanese Wood-Pigeon), then catch the ferry back to Tokyo around midday and enjoy pelagic birding from the deck. BUT, winds were high and the seas were forecast to be around 3 meters. In these conditions, the ship might not be able to land on Miyakejima.

It turned out that we did arrive at 5am at Miyakejima, but the forecast for the afternoon was only for increasing wind, so we had a decision to make. We could disembark per the original plan and risk being stuck on the island if it could not dock for us on its return. OR, we could stay on board for the duration of the day, all the way to Hachijojima and back, forfeiting those four landbirds and sticking to just pelagic birding. We ultimately decided that we could not take the risk of being stuck on the island because we had an early flight out of Tokyo the next morning; missing that would have seriously gummed up our plans.

(Note that sometimes the ferry is entirely canceled due to high seas. We were told that we should start to be concerned at 3-4 meter seas, as that is around the cutoff.)

The next several minutes were quite comical. One of the female crew members, who did not speak a lick of English, realized that we had not disembarked as scheduled on our ticket and became very upset with us as we refused to leave the ship. We tried to explain what we were doing, and that we would have to book additional fare, but she did not understand. With the help of one of the other crew members, who understood enough English to facilitate communication, we finally got our point across. They were really quite polite about the whole thing, and I could understand that woman's initial displeasure with us. In Japan one is expected to stick to schedule, and we certainly delayed the ship's departure from Miyakejima while we figured that whole thing out.

Short-tailed Albatross – a huge target bird for a winter trip to Japan (JH)
With plenty of time for pelagic birding ahead, and already running on fumes, we went back to sleep as the ship proceeded towards Hachijojima. We were in no rush to get to the deck for first light because we knew from research that the stretch of sea between Miyakejima and Hachijojima tended to hold far fewer birds than the waters between Miyakejima and Tokyo.

After a bit more sleep and feeling much better we arrived at Hachijojima, where the ship would be docked for 20-30 minutes. Our first order of business was to disembark and go straight to the ticket office on the island so we could purchase our unexpected additional fare. Once that was taken care of, we had a handful of minutes to bird the island. We knew that IZU THRUSH was sometimes seen near the ferry dock, and we were lucky to find one rather quickly in some scrub! Nice save. A BLUE ROCK-THRUSH was on a jetty, a few JAPANESE CORMORANTS flew by, and we saw our first gulls of the trip.

As advertised, the leg from Hachijojima to Miyakejima was mostly bird-free. We did have a few quality seabirds, such as our first distant SHORT-TAILED ALBATROSS and a fleeting glimpse of JAPANESE MURRELET, a bonus bird for the trip. But we did not have anything on that leg that we wouldn't see between Miyakejima and Tokyo.

The ship did end up landing for passengers at Miyakejima, so in hindsight we would have gotten away with the original plan. But I think that the decision we made was the right one as far as weighing risk versus reward with the information we had at the time.

Once on our way from Miyakejima, the pelagic birding picked up. We started with a nice variety of gulls: SLATY-BACKED, VEGA, BLACK-TAILED, and KAMCHATKA GULLS were in evidence, and our first of several BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKES was nice. I eBirded the journey in ~10-mile legs to give a more accurate depiction of what we saw and where along the route. In total, we ended up tallying 10 LAYSAN ALBATROSS, 8 BLACK-FOOTED ALBATROSS, 14 SHORT-TAILED ALBATROSS, 26 albatross sp., 1 STREAKED SHEARWATER, 1 POMARINE JAEGER, 3 JAPANESE MURRELET, and 18 BLACK-LEGGED KITTIWAKE. Views were mostly distant, some incredibly so with birds identified only via DSLR “chimping.” This is seawatching from a passenger ship, so you can only hope to intercept birds during your straight-line transect.

From what I could gather from other trip reports, we did well with albatrosses, poorly with Streaked Shearwaters (often abundant), and we did well to get the murrelet. Tristram's Storm-Petrels are very hit-or-miss, usually missed but can appear in large numbers if the winds are right. Northern Fulmars are sometimes seen, and rarely a Bonin Petrel is reported. At least that is my understanding. Anything is possible with seabirds.

Majestic Mount Fuji was visible to our west as we approached sunset in Tokyo Bay. With no rush this time, we walked the 5-10 minutes to the Hamamatsucho station to retrieve luggage and navigated the subway. This initially was confusing, but with the help of friendly Japanese commuters, we were able to select the correct ticket for the zone of travel, and we found using Google maps and selecting the train option made the journey quite logical. We arrived at the Haneda Inn for the night, where an English-speaking staff greeted us! Our stay here was quite good. We had negotiated a crazy first few days in Japan without any mishaps. From here on out the pace would be much less hectic.

**February 8:**

Haneda Inn offers buffet-style breakfast from 4am. They swiftly transferred us to HND for our direct flight to Kagoshima (KOJ). ANA’s domestic flights leave from Terminal 2. Check-in was a breeze, not a surprise for a domestic flight. We arrived to a seasonally cold day by...
local standards. We again rented our vehicle from Nippon via Tocoo; they have a shuttle van to their office, which is literally just across the street from the airport parking lot. Again, there were no issues with the rental.

We drove northwest towards Arasaki/Izumi, but we would stop en route along the Sendai River in Satsuma. We ended up spending three hours here; it was very birdy. We managed 43 species, highlights being 5 LONG-BILLED PLOVER, a cooperative CRESTED KINGFISHER at the northern bridge, many ASIAN HOUSE-MARTINS overhead, 3 JAPANESE WAGTAILS on the river, and 6 OLIVE-BACKED PIPITS in rice fields northeast of the north bridge. Actually, there were many more highlights, and most birds were firsts for the trip, but those are probably the “best” birds we had.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42583807

We would spend the rest of the day at the crane mecca of Arasaki/Izumi, specifically the East Fields followed by the Euchi River reedbeds. We had stunning weather and used every bit of daylight. The east fields were loaded with cranes, waterfowl, skylarks, pipits and wagtails. Some 5000 HOODED CRANES and 1500 WHITE-NAPE CRANES dotted the fields. Among them were a few each of COMMON and SANDHILL CRANES. There were no mega-rare crane species here this winter. Bird of the afternoon was probably the “Green-headed” EASTERN YELLOW WAGTAIL that popped up from a ditch along the road. Julian was all over the flight call of RED-THROATED PIPIT, which allowed us to pin down a few. REED BUNTING was the default bunting along the east field roads. We thoroughly enjoyed the crane spectacle, particularly as flocks of Hooded flew past in great afternoon light.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42586835

We spent the waning minutes of daylight at the Euchi River reedbeds in search of Chinese Penduline-Tit, but all we could manage was possibly hearing a few birds calling in the distance. Perhaps we got there too late in the day. Two CHESTNUT-EARED BUNTINGS made the stop worth it for sure. In a wet ditch near the river we were treated to spitting-distance shadowy views of 2 RUDDY-BREASTED CRAKES and a BROWN-CHEEKED RAIL just moments and yards apart from one another!

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42586836

Night at Hotel King in Izumi.

February 9:

We began this day where we ended the evening before, at the reed beds. This time we nailed about 10 CHINESE PENDULINE-TITS and headed for the crane center area for the first time. Feeding was happening, and the birds were abundant. Cranes and waterfowl especially were swarming. While we were watching the frenzy, we were surprised by 5 GEESE flying overhead incredibly backlit, which we figured were BEAN-GEESE. Knowing that they were good birds for the area, whatever they were, we followed their flight line and eventually found them feeding in a field just east of the bridge. There were actually 3 TUNDRA BEAN-GEESE and 2 GREATER WHITE-FRONTED GEESE. Sweet!

Around the same time Nick had a look at our first BLACK-FACED SPOONBILL in flight. A HEN HARRIETER quickly coursed very low over the fields. Another CHESTNUT-EARED BUNTING popped up. A large flock of RUSSET SPARROWS were conspicuous near the bridge. The same four crane species were again easily found, but one particular family group stole the show. A COMMON CRANE was paired with a COMMON x HOODED CRANE hybrid and had two young in tow. The young birds very much resembled

Nick poppoing off a few frames of Hooded Crane (JH)
Common Cranes. This was a fascinating surprise. There were a few rather gray-bodied Hooded Cranes also on site that makes one wonder if Common Crane genes are the culprit.

We proceeded to a small estuary that borders the east fields at their east end. This seawall proved to be a great vantage point at low tide. Here we had our first looks at KENTISH PLOVERS, about 15 of them. Amongst them was a single LESSER SAND-PLOVER, a scarce winterer. A scouring of the ROOK flock revealed 8 or more DAURIAN JACKDAWS, seemingly all young birds. A sharp adult “TAIMYR” GULL, one of East Asia’s least-known large gull taxa, was seen well and photographed.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42605798

We spent the next couple hours poking our way along the coastline to the east. A random roadside pool held 3 EURASIAN SPOONBILLS and our first real look at a BLACK-FACED. We thought it would be a good idea to drive on top of the tsunami wall there...until the wall ended and we (Dave) had to reverse the vehicle to what served as an exit ramp. While up there we did have nice views of the water, but that stretch of coast was devoid of birds. A JAPANESE BUSH WARBLER, a common passerine in the area, threw us a for a bit of a loop by foraging high in a pine tree. We also had another one or two BLUE ROCK-THRUSH and a couple more OLIVE-BACKED PIPITS. The harbors around there did not seem to hold many gulls, which was a bit of a bummer as Nick was hoping for some quality gull photography on this afternoon.

We finished with that coastal drive around midday and wanted to give a look nearby for Ochre-rumped Bunting (AKA Japanese Reed Bunting). I am still unsure of this species’ winter distribution in Japan, but it supposedly can occur around here in very small numbers. We searched in vain along reed beds on the east bank of the Komenotsu River. We didn’t turn up anything unusual or unique here, but it was birdy and we recorded 27 species including four species of bunting.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42608607

The rest of daylight would be spent at Kogawa Dam. We circumnavigated the lake, birding along the road and from the dam itself. We arrived around 2pm, which happened to be a good time for soaring raptors. After quick NORTHERN GOSHAWK and EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK sightings from the dam, we spotted a MOUNTAIN HAWK-EAGLE soaring to the south. Views were distant but prolonged and sufficient for ID. This would be one of the better birds we would find all trip. They’re around in appropriate habitat, but quite scarce and rarely seen. Along the lake road itself we ran into small pockets of passerines. We had our fair share of tits, thrushes, bulbuls and buntings. A massive flock of 150 MANDARIN DUCKS on the lake was a sweet sight. Two RYUKYU MINIVETS flew over the road, calling as they went. A single GOLDCREST was new for the trip too. After some intense searching we finally found our biggest target, a pair of GRAY BUNTINGS. They were obnoxiously skulky, but we all eventually scored decent views.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42608612

Night again at Hotel King, Izumi.

February 10:

Today was forecast to be soggy, and sure enough rain of varying intensity fell throughout the entire day. Knowing this, we made today our Yatsushiro day. The birding up the coast at Yatsushiro consists largely of scoping gulls, waterfowl, and shorebirds. Since the passerine birding would be light there, we figured it would best suit the rainy weather. But the coastal birding at Yatsushiro is largely tide-dependent, and we wanted to avoid dead low tide since everything would be scattered far out on the mudflats. That gave us a bit of...
time to kill in the morning, which we spent around the wet fields at Arasaki. It was mostly the same stuff, though we turned up two LITTLE RINGED PLOVERS and two more BLACK-FACED SPOONBILLS.

We were soon on our way up the coast to the north as the rain only fell harder. Our arrival at the seawall/tsunami wall overlooking the Yatsushiro flats was timed well, as the tide was coming in, slowly covering the mud and pushing the birds closer to us. The flats were littered with several thousand NORTHERN PINTAIL and lesser numbers of other dabblers. A pair of RED-BREASTED Mergansers was new for us. Four spoonbills here were, not surprisingly, BLACK-FACED.

The weather was atrocious. It was pouring rain pretty much nonstop. Light was low and visibility was poor. This made studying the gulls and shorebirds a bit challenging. We couldn't even see the cormorants roosting on offshore rocks nearly well enough to ID. Still, Julian picked out a nice adult MONGOLIAN GULL in breeding plumage among the smaller, darker, basic-plumaged VEGA GULLS. We had decent views, on the ground and in flight, of about 10 SAUNDERS'S GULLS. The large gull situation here was, at best, confusing. The issue primarily lies with “TAIMYR” GULL, a taxon that looks intermediate between Vega Gull and Heuglin's Gull. It may be a hybrid between those two; more work needs to be done. I was hoping to get in a solid study session with these birds, but the weather would not allow. A SLATY-BACKED GULL or two added more variety to the mix. BLACK-HEADED and BLACK-TAILED GULLS were common. That was as many as seven gull species, depending on your taxonomic philosophy.

Of note, Pallas's Gull had been recorded here for several winters in a row, but it has been a few winters since it has occurred. I don't know the whole story, but this might have been just one bird that wintered for several years in a row and is now gone. In other words, don't count on it, but keep an eye out. While navigating one of the many tsunami wall ramps, Dave briefly forgot that he wasn't driving his pickup truck and scraped the front fender of the car at the base of the ramp. Our vehicle had pretty low clearance. Oops. At least you didn't drop your camera, Dave! (Can you feel the foreshadowing?…)

As we drove our way further north up the coast, we noticed several SAUNDERS’S GULLS in flight and pulled over to find a flooded rice field full of them. Sixty-eight birds, to be exact. Mostly first cycles, but a few adults as well. Always nice to see a high percentage of young of a declining species. Other birds were commuting over the fields as we enjoyed the gulls, including two more BLACK-FACED SPOONBILLS. We were quite surprised to see a flock of three SWANS flying northward, and more surprised when we realized that two were WHOOPER SWANS and one was a “BEWICK’S” TUNDRA SWAN. Both species are unusual in the area.
We continued to poke our way through the wet fields. As we drove past a few farm houses surrounded by thickets and small trees, we flushed a dumpy-looking thing from the roadside that I could not immediately place. Luckily it landed further into the thickets – EURASIAN WOODCOCK. Actually two of them! A life look for me (Nick)...larger than I was expecting!

Even further north we came to yet another estuary. This must have been a weak lunar tide because there was still some exposed mudflat at dead high tide. There were loads of birds here, too. We spent more time sorting through the commoners in search of rares. Shorebirds were the main attraction here. We ended up with 8 species on the limited flats, which I imagine is solid late-winter diversity. Twenty-five BLACK-BELLIED PLOVER, 8 LESSER SAND-PLOVER, 12 KENTISH PLOVER, 3 EURASIAN CURLEW, 45 DUNLIN, 1 COMMON SANDPIPER, 6 COMMON GREENSHANK, 1 COMMON REDSHANK. We also had a hybrid EURASIAN x AMERICAN WIGEON among the many hundred Eurasians. We could have continued further and found more mudflats, but we finally lost light for the day.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42635685

Yatsushiro tide tables: https://www.tidetime.org/asia/japan/yatsushiro.htm

We did not have local lodging booked for that evening because our initial plan was to be all the way on the east coast of Kyushu, near Kadogawa, for an 8am Japanese Murrelet boat cruise the next morning. However after finding that species on the Izu Islands ferry earlier in the trip, we decided to bag the murrelet boat. It would have been a half-day detour plus a lot more driving to take that cruise. Doing so probably would have also gotten us Pacific Reef-Heron and given us an outside shot at Japanese Wood-Pigeon, but we opted for a more relaxed pace instead. We booked Hotel Route-Inn via booking.com's phone app. Surprisingly, it was one of the very last rooms in town that were available via the popular English language booking apps. The hotel had all the necessities for us for one night, but we were forced to take smoking rooms.

Out of nowhere this morphed into a delightful evening. The hotel happened to be located in a hopping little downtown area that was loaded with restaurants, bars, and all sorts of adult entertainment. Many places didn't open until 8pm or later. We enjoyed tasty Japanese whiskey at a hole-in-the-wall bar followed by delicious noodle soup. If we had not planned a very early start the next day, we would have enjoyed ourselves well into the night. Who'd have thought Yatsushiro could have this sort of personality – we sure didn't! These are the little pleasures of travel...those unexpected discoveries as you're exploring a new area on a whim.

February 11:
We were out the door very early this morning because we wanted to be at Lake Miike for sunrise or so. We did well with keeping to time and arrived just as it was getting bright enough to bird the woods. We stuck solely to the campground area, which is on the west side of the lake. It was birdy enough to keep us busy for nearly 3 hours. We did well with one of our biggest targets right away, WHITE-BELLIED PIGEON. We probably had a total of three of them, but one in particular was singing from the canopy over our heads near the parking area. This was my favorite bird sound of the trip, and it reminded me more of something you'd hear in a tropical rainforest than temperate forest during winter!
We worked our way around the semi-open campground, which held its fair share of sunlit passerines. A stunning male RED-FLANKED BLUETAIL had our cameras held up for a while. There were DAURIAN REDSTARTS present for comparison. JAPANESE WHITE-EYE was the most common passerine, as expected. We were focusing closely on woodpeckers, as we were in search of good views of White-backed Woodpecker. For a while though, all we could turn up was JAPANESE WOODPECKER, a good bird in its own right.

A very cooperative (and likely unhealthy) WHITE’S THRUSH stole the show for a bit. It let us creep a bit too closely for a well bird, but we took advantage of the photo ops. A second individual kept a greater distance from us. We had our first perched looks at RYUKYU MINIVET here, about the same time we stumbled across a small flock of YELLOW-THROATED BUNTINGS.

As we were finishing our loop we came across a few OLIVE-BACKED PIPITS feeding on the lawn. Per reports, this is a very reliable place to see this species.

Before departing we decided to take a walk back up the entrance road where we ended up finding a very vocal pair of WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKERS, which is a species that Julian was rather keen on seeing. Dave and I got our fill of Julian's stories of mythical UK megas from his childhood, sparked by our killer views of Daurian Redstart (AKA ‘deadstart’) and White’s Thrush in particular.

Oh, we did scope the lake, despite the light being harsh looking east; we only had common stuff. It was worth a look though, as there are records of Baer’s Pochard and Baikal Teal from here.

Keeping on schedule, we drove further east to Kota Ponds/Shrine in search of Baikal Teal that were reported here a few days earlier. Not knowing anything other than the location of the ponds on a map, we had some trouble actually getting a view of said ponds. First we attempted to approach from the west side, which meant walking trails uphill to a few vantage points that overlooked the shrine and pond. The problem was that most of the water view was blocked by vegetation. We were able to pick out a few BAIKAL TEAL anyway, and we got lucky with a couple RYUKYU MINIVETS that teed up for our best views yet. On our way back to the car we flushed a Turdus thrush from the path that looked and sounded good for Brown-headed, but we were unable to relocate it and felt that we could not completely eliminate another Pale Thrush from the equation.

We were still hoping for better views of the ponds. I’m not sure if there’s trail access from the west side or not. It’s entirely possible that we simply did not find the right path, but we did not want to take the time to explore any further. Instead we drove to the northeast corner of the ponds, which on satellite imagery looked as if one could drive right to the water’s edge. Sure enough, we were basically able to do this. We did have to ascend a small berm to get our views. From here we happily counted 58 sexy BAIKAL TEAL (not too shabby!) and 30 MANDARIN DUCKS amongst the more common waterfowl.
Very pleased with our day so far, and making good time, we wanted to continue to the east coast of the island to explore the Hitotsuze River and the Sadowara Farm Ponds. The farm ponds, depending on water level, can be good for waterfowl, long-legged waders, and shorebirds. The water was too high for many shorebirds to make use of it, but it was a fine spot for spoonbills. We had a flock of 14 BLACK-FACED SPOONBILLS and one immature EURASIAN SPOONBILL. Otherwise the ponds were quiet. We spent some time poking around the river mouth in search of gull flocks to photograph. Gulls remained scarce, though we did have one flock roosting on a small sandbar in the river that included 4 SAUNDERS’ S GULLS. Our attempt to chum them in with bread and cat food failed miserably.

We poked around the coast for the next couple hours in search of gulls and shorebirds on sandbars and mudflats, but we were unable to find much of anything. There were no flats to speak of, so perhaps we had poor tide timing. Rather than spending more time exploring, we decided to head back towards Kagoshima Airport and get some sleep, as we had a long day planned for tomorrow!

Of note, a couple evenings prior, a tour group had a Greater Spotted Eagle flying over the mouth of the river, presumably to roost. We would have lost quite a bit of sleep waiting for that needle in a haystack, but it is worth noting for future visitors. We did keep a close eye out as we drove up and down the river.

We spent the night at City Hotel in Kokubu, which was much farther from the airport than we had realized when we booked it. It was way too far to offer an airport shuttle, so we would have to return the rental car first thing in the morning, before our early flight.

February 12:
We awoke to a coating of snow on the ground but had no issues getting to the airport. We made sure we were there for rental car office opening. The vehicle was dropped off quickly and we made our flight easily. We flew from KOJ to KUH (Kushiro, Hokkaido) via a quick layover at HND.

We rented from Nissan at Kushiro airport via Japan Experience. Another easy-breezy car pickup. This time we made sure to rent a beast, a Nissan XTrail with snow tires. (As noted above, we rented an ETC card not realizing that we would not encounter any tolls on Hokkaido, so we did not actually need it.)

It was a mad dash to get birding! We had two stops to make before our first shot at Blakiston’s Fish-Owl. So we drove north to Otowa Bridge, where a NORTHERN SHRIKE had been wintering. We spotted the shrike straight away, perched rather low to the stream. We parked the car and gathered our gear only to find that the bird had vanished. Better view desired. Yes, we have this species throughout the northern tier of North America, but shrike taxonomy is far from settled, and we would at the very least be seeing a different subspecies here. While here we had our first looks at the majestic RED-CROWNED CRANE. This is a well-known roost site for the crane, so it is a popular dawn location for birders at this time of year.

Very nearby we had a tip on a URAL OWL roost. With directions well-researched, we found the bird resting comfortably in its tree. The Ural Owls on Hokkaido are ghostly pale, IMO a better looking form than the darker subspecies. This was without a doubt one of the most sought after species of the trip for the three of us.

High on everyone’s “want” list, this ghostly Ural Owl didn’t disappoint (Top: JH and above: NB)
On a roll, we spent as much time with the owl as we could before we had to continue northeast to Yoroushi Hot Spring, where we would be spending the night at Yuyado Daiichi. We wanted to be set up by dark, in case the owl came in for an early meal.

From the moment we rolled up, we realized that this would be a different experience. See our notes in the “Hokkaido planning” section above for additional info. Lodge staff greeted us with tea and sat us in their lobby that overlooked the stream and feeding station. We had our first looks at “BRANDT’S” EURASIAN JAY and the asiatica subspecies of EURASIAN NUTHATCH.

Our traditional Japanese-style room was luxurious and spacious, also with a view over the stream. We headed downstairs, made dinner reservations, and set up for the owl vigil. Basically, you sit along the large glass windows and wait for the owl. Visits, as you would imagine, are unpredictable. The birds did not show at all the night before. Sometimes one has to wait through the night for a predawn visit. They keep a calendar of sightings at the front desk. Well, it’s a good thing we were set up early, because the owl caught a fish right outside the window around 6:10pm. The entirety of the visit probably lasted a minute or two, max.

As you could imagine, dinner was quite relaxed! Pressure’s off, baby. Our two target owl species within hours of one another, and great views to boot. Already on a bit of a high, we were about to enjoy the meal of the trip. Some five courses came out for us, all wonderfully presented and delicious (though we weren’t quite sure what some of it was). Halfway through our meal, Mark Brazil, who was guiding a group of his own, was kind enough to notify us when a SABLE appeared around the feeding station. This was a life weasel for us and one of the cooler mammals of the trip for sure.

Sable (video): https://vimeo.com/278923591

After dinner we again set up shop at the lobby windows to wait for another owl appearance. This time there was no tension, so we enjoyed local Whiskey and recounted the afternoon’s wildly successful events. At 10:15pm, after being entertained by two Sables chasing one another, we called it a night.

Another difficult and unpredictable species, Solitary Snipe was seen well at two sites! (JH)
February 13:
At breakfast this morning we learned that the Fish-Owl made a repeat appearance around 4am. Breakfast was buffet style and truly superb. In the stream right outside the breakfast room was a SOLITARY SNIPE. This is a regular wintering bird here but is far from guaranteed on any given day. We were pleased to have great on-the-ground views to compliment our flight views from Karuizawa.

Solitary Snipe (video): https://vimeo.com/278954468

We reluctantly departed Yuyado Daiichi at 9am. We were in no rush to leave that place! We had scheduled more time on Hokkaido than any other island, in part to allow for a weather delay or two if necessary. The forecast for the rest of our stay was fine with no imminent blizzards on the horizon. Given that information, we had the opportunity to explore a bit. Of interest to us was the Shari-Abashari stretch of coast, which marks the southernmost edge of the Sea of Okhotsk. There is actually a history of Ross's Gull wrecks here during inclement weather in early winter. We assume that this is an under-birded stretch of coast and deserved a check while we were nearby. Shari itself was iced in. Solid sea ice. While it made for quite a visual (my first personal experience with sea ice), it was no good for waterbirds. We had our long-awaited first looks at EAGLES, one or two each of STELLER'S and WHITE-TAILED. We could see that there was open water to the west, towards Abashari, so we continued in that direction, hoping for a concentration of alcids, waterfowl, and/or gulls. We were disappointed to find the open water mostly devoid of birds. Hey, it was worth a shot.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42720513

Sea ice map: http://www1.kaiho.mlit.go.jp/KAN1/drift_ice/ice_chart/ice_calendar.html

From Shari we were ultimately headed to Rausu for the night. The most direct route would have been over the Shiretoko Pass, which is along the Shiretoko-Odan Road (Route 334 per Google maps) on the Shiretoko Peninsula. BUT this pass is CLOSED during winter, so instead we drove southeast along 244, which reaches the coast at Shibetsu. From the Shibetsu area we drove north up the coast towards Rausu and began stopping at overlooks and harbors. At a small coastal harbor (one of many) possibly called Kunbetsu (?) we began to get into some birds. The dominant sea ducks in east Hokkaido are BLACK SCOTER, COMMON GOLDENEYE, HARLEQUIN DUCK, COMMON MERGANSER, RED-BREASTED MERGANSER, and GREATER SCAUP. This particular spot had one each of ARCTIC and PACIFIC LOONS plus one or two distant Arctic/Pacific. A bit further north, from the Sakimui Bridge, we picked out another ARCTIC LOON and our first SPECTACLED GUILLEMOT. Loons were scarce for us, and these were the only two Arctics we would see, so they are especially worth mentioning. Our first Hokkaido flocks of large white-headed gulls were apparent; SLATY-BACKED GULL is by far the most common species, with lesser numbers of GLAUCOUS and GLAUCOUS-WINGED. There was no sea ice in sight, which we took as a bad omen for tomorrow’s eagle cruise!

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42720511

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42720596

Unfortunately we had to call it quits with light still left because we had yet another date with Blakiston’s Fish-Owl that evening and still had to check into our hotel in Rausu. We booked this trip too late to get a room at Washi-no-Yado, so we had to settle for a place in town called Rausu-no-Yado Marumi, booked via Japanican. We were surprised to get a room on the second floor that overlooked the ocean! There is a Seicomart right there for foodstuffs. Anyway, we arrived at Washi-no-Yado and were shown the “observation room.” See my notes in the “Hokkaido planning” section above for more info. To reiterate…shit show. But we all crammed in and made it work. Once again we got lucky with the owl, having to hardly wait at all after dark for its 5:45pm appearance. Satisfied with our two easy BLAKISTON’S experiences, we took off at 7:45pm.

February 14:
We were greeted by a stunning sunrise view from our hotel room. There was nothing moving offshore, which is a shame because we had a great vantage. I went down to the water’s edge behind the hotel to try to chum in some gulls with cat food. Amazingly they would not take the bait. Spoiled by quality fish I guess! I was still able to get a few photos before we had to leave to make the eagle boat.

Our eagle cruise was at 9am on the boat Kamuiwakka. Upon arrival we were informed that there was in fact no inshore sea ice, so we would not get that experience. The trip was shortened from 2 hours to 90 minutes, and price was knocked from 10,000yen to 7,000yen per person. We had heard that we were still in for a treat regardless of the ice conditions, and this was 100% accurate. The eagles put
Steller’s Sea Eagle (above) and White-tailed Eagle (below) JH Eagle (video): https://vimeo.com/278952864
on quite a show. We estimated 50 STELLER’S and 75 WHITE-TAILED – just wow. At one point at least 100 eagles were visible at once. In addition to the star attraction, we had some nice looks at gulls and ducks as we commuted through the harbor. Back at the dock, a couple of ASIAN ROSY-FINCHES called as they flew high overhead, but we did not score any views.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42740771

In the afternoon we chose to explore a bit more, birding our way up the coast north of Rausu, stopping at any decent ocean view. It was still very quiet on the water. Where were the birds? We did have some nice gull flocks along the way, especially a few pure groups of KAMCHATKA GULLS. The highlights were few but included PACIFIC LOON, 2 COMMON MURRE, several SPECTACLED GUILLEMOTS, a flight view of a CRESTED AUMLLET, and our first SIKI DEER of the trip.

Night back at Rausu-no-Yado with full dinner included.

February 15:
We were on the road early this morning, eager to get ourselves further east and hopefully into some waterbirds! Hopes were high for the Notsuke Peninsula, a long sandspit that juts into the sea. The road out to the tip is some 10 miles long. We went about as far as we could, to the nature center/observation tower about 9 miles out. The weather was... challenging. We were greeted by a gale from the northwest which could not be escaped in this open landscape. We’re talking the kind of wind that knocks scopes over with ease, blows sand above eye level, and makes winter birding miserable. Returning here later in the week would have taken us far out of our way, so we had to power through.

This can be a decent place for Asian Rosy-Finch and Snow Bunting, but in this weather we were not holding our breaths for any passerines. We finally got out of the car to scope from the tower. While unloading his gear from the trunk, Dave’s camera slipped out of his hand and slammed against the pavement. Turns out that pavement beats camera like rock beats scissors.

Dave wouldn’t be missing that camera today. From the tower we were pleased to see many alcids moving offshore, for the first time. But they were mostly specks that were rocketing between whitecaps. We were able to identify some birds as they shot past; there were several SPECTACLED GUILLEMOTS, three LEAST AUKLETS, and a THICK-BILLED MURRE.

BLACK SCOTER was the dominant duck, but we were on a search for “STEJNEGER’S” WHITE-WINGED SCOTER. After many stops on our way back towards the mainland, we finally located a handful. It seems that the first 5k of the road is actually the most productive for this species based on previous reports, and this is where we had ours.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42762054

Once we were done with the Notsuke Peninsula we headed southeast for the Nemuro Peninsula. Stopping at a couple harbors en route we had the usual suspects except for a single adult “HERRING” GULL, the only one we would see on all of Hokkaido. This bird was interesting in that it seemed pale-mantled and had a staring pale iris, recalling smithsonianus. I ran back for my camera only to have the bird fly seconds before I returned. My flight photos were equivocal, though the broad white trailing edge was more vegae-like.

Our first Nemuro Peninsula stop was the Onnemoto Bird Hide, where there is a history of a wintering flock of Rock Sandpipers. We did not connect with this species, and there had not yet been any reports from there all winter. We had our first of many PIGEON GUILLEMOTS there, apparently of both the snowi and columba subspecies.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42764553

Next we scoped for a while from Cape Nosappu, where alcids were more abundant. SPECTACLED GUILLEMOTS were common, including several small flocks. We estimated about 45 of them. We also had 1 COMMON MURRE, 3 PIGEON GUILLEMOTS
(both forms), 1 ANCIENT MURRELET and 1 LEAST AUKLET. Most views were quite distant, but a few of the guillemots hung pretty close to shore. Immature RED-FACED CORMORANTS are known to winter here in ones and twos, and we had at least two birds this afternoon. One came in to roost on the cliffs to the west of the lighthouse, and another was seen well flying by with the numerous PELAGIC CORMORANTS.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42765081

We stopped back at Onnemoto hide for another Rock Sand check, also in vain. But Julian spotted a SHORT-EARED OWL coursing the fields. We had a second one further down the road as we drove back west.

We checked in at Furen Lodge and met Take and his wife Masako. This is a true birder’s lodge, run by a birder for birders. Take’s enthusiasm is infectious, and his wealth of knowledge on Hokkaido birdlife is impressive. We picked his brain for as much info as we could, and we spent some time going through his extensive library. Dinner was delicious.

February 16:
Dave and I took a pre-breakfast walk up the road to the Shunkunitai Nature Center woodlands. There were a couple of birdy pockets, and we tallied a quick 21 species, including two encounters with a flyover BOHEMIAN WAXWING, before we had to be back for breakfast at 7.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42823237

This morning we were scheduled for the 9am alcid boat out of Habomai. It cost 5000 yen per person for 900-1045am cruise (see my notes on this in the Hokkaido Planning section above). Despite our gripes, we had fine views of several alcids. We ended up with 10 PIGEON GUILLEMOT (both forms), 30 SPECTACLED GUILLEMOT, 3 ANCIENT MURRELET and 3 LEAST AUKLET.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42827781

After the cruise we dropped Dave back at the lodge for a rest, and Julian and I decided to check a couple more harbors. Wheel Rock at Hanasaki Harbor provides a great vantage to the sea. There were no alcids here, but we did have 4 more “STEJNEGER’S” WHITE-WINGED SCOTERS and 7 RED-NECKED GREBES. Down at Hanasaki Port itself we photographed some gulls and proceeded to Ochiishi Port. A Gyr falcon had been reported here a few days prior as a flyby, and Asian Rosy-Finches are known to winter along the slopes above the harbor. It was dead for us.

A quick check of woodlands near Furen Lodge didn't get us much. Night at Furen Lodge, back before dark to plan our last day on Hokkaido.

February 17:
This was our Hokkaido “clean-up day,” and we had many stops scheduled on our way back towards Kushiro. Snow was forecast for the day and we had lots to accomplish before our 7pm flight to Tokyo! We took an early start on our stealth mission for ASIAN ROSY-FINCH.

Diminutive Ancient Murrelets (NB)
We would visit the infamous house on Cape Kiritappu that feeds the local wintering finch flock. The problem is that the owner of the home/inn detests birders that try to view his finches from the road. Our plan was to get in and out early, not long after sunrise, before anyone could notice our presence. The plan worked, as we didn't have to wait very long before a flock of 48 birds landed on the powerlines along the road. Here we had prolonged views of the skittish flock from the car. We did not have any issues with the owner. Next we quickly scoped from the lighthouse parking area further down the road and had another 3 “STEJNEGER’S” WHITE-WINGED SCOTERS. Note that seawatching here on a sunny morning is tough because you’re mainly looking to the east. This cape is also a known spot for Rough-legged Hawk, but we were not aware of any being seen this winter.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42855734

We jogged inland a bit to the Kiritappu Wetlands Center because Eurasian Bullfinch (“Baikal,” a possible split) had been reported there before. It was a shot in the dark, and we only had common passerines here.

Biwase Observation Point is the known local wintering spot for “BLACK” BRANT, and we had little trouble finding the flock, though they were distant. A trip tick anyway.

Our route took us by Lake Akkeshi where we would check for Smew, which had eluded us to this point and was a major target bird. After a quick convenience store stop we picked a random side road to check for a view of the lake on its south shore. In the open water directly in front of us was a handsome pair of SMEW!

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42858999

We continued towards the city on Route 44 and chose a random pull-off to stop and bird. We were caught off guard when a flock of 4 EURASIAN BULLFINCHES flew over calling – nice! Looking on a map now, I see that this was on the northern border of Kushirocho Forest Park.

We were really kicking butt at this point, even ahead of schedule for the day. We took advantage of this extra time to drop into Kushiro itself so Dave could try to track down a new camera body. He found a camera shop and soon walked out with a brand new Nikon D500

The snow began to fall as we made our way north out of Kushiro. We stopped by Otowa Bridge again in hopes of a better look at the wintering NORTHERN SHRIKE that we had seen so briefly back on the 12th. Lo and behold the bird was back. This time we were able to set up scopes for prolonged views before it flew off to the north. I hit a bit of a dead-end trying to ID this bird to subspecies:


Our last scheduled stop of the day was the Tsurui Ito Red-crowned Crane Sanctuary. Up to this point we had not yet had a chance to really spend time with this iconic Japanese bird. The moderate snowfall made for a wonderful wintry atmosphere. There were some-
125 birds in the field here, plus a bonus COMMON CRANE, which is a rare bird on Hokkaido. The cranes weren't doing much around midday other than feeding in the field. A few birds flew out, but we did not see any fly in. There was a bit of dancing and calling, which I'm glad we were able to see/hear. For those looking for a more exciting crane experience, I recommend researching the various local crane sanctuaries and their feeding schedules. With some effort, you can get a good show from them.

We were prepared to spend the entire day searching for our targets, but we got everything very easily and were able to grab a relaxing lunch before heading back towards Kushiro Airport, where we had another easy vehicle drop-off and shuttle across the street to the terminal. The weather cleared just in time to get us out with only a minor delay. Note that the restaurants at this airport only exist BEFORE you go through security; there are only snacks available at the gates. We learned the hard way and I got a bit hangry...

Easy arrival back in Tokyo (HND). Night at Haneda Inn, again.

February 18:
Julian had to get back a day earlier than Dave and I, so he took the hotel's shuttle to HND for his departure, which went smoothly. Dave and I walked across the street to Nippon Rent-A-Car, where we had secured a cheap 12-hour compact car rental for the day. We drove east to Chiba/Ibaraki to clean up on a handful of key species we didn't want to miss.

We ended up doing a lot more driving than birding. Traffic was dense at times, and the going was slow, even on the toll roads. Our targets were very scattered throughout the two prefectures, and we ended up doing a large loop.

One of our prime targets was Brown-headed Thrush. This species can be seen in small numbers at several locations in and around Tokyo, but a particular cluster of reports around Narita Airport was most convenient for us. We began by walking the woodland immediately north of the Hilton Tokyo Narita Airport, between the hotel itself and the Tokko River. After unsuccessfully stalking a couple of Turdus thrushes in dense undergrowth, we had brief but close views of a BROWN-HEADED THRUSH along the north edge of the woodland. The birding here was good for common passerines and included a JAPANESE WAGTAIL.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42905236

From here we drove ENE to the Tone River reed beds in search of Ochre-rumped Bunting, which had been seen there recently. Upon arrival the wind really kicked up, and we knew that passerine birding would be affected. We dipped on the bunting but had our first looks at EASTERN MARSH-HARRIERS. Flocks of diving ducks littered the river, and several species of gull were commuting up and down river.

https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S42909987

We made a very quick stop at Ukishima Marsh, only because we were driving past it, and noted another EASTERN MARSH-HARRIER. This is a very reliable spot for this raptor, and from what I can gather it may be a roost site for them, as I have seen several double-digit evening counts.

Our next stop was the Edosaki rice paddies, where a flock of TAIGA BEAN-GEESE winters. We found the birds pretty quickly and proceeded to drive the farm roads so we could get close views and photos…that is, until a man began waving from the other end of the fields and yelling at us in Japanese. It was obvious that he was adamantly telling us to leave. It took us a bit to realize that we had entered from the west side (which must have been the back way) and illegally driven into the field complex, which is actually a protected area! We had no idea; it was an honest mistake. These things can happen when you chase down random eBird reports that include no background information. Anyway, we left the fields and drove away without even getting out of the car. It was a bit anti-climactic. Before we left, though, we did pick out two GREATER WHITE-FRONTED GEESE in the bean-goose flock.
We would find our next stop, the Motono rice fields, more frustrating. We were in search of the “BEWICK’S” TUNDRA SWANS that winter here. We had a particular farm pond marked, but we arrived to find carloads of people doing who-knows-what, and only six sleeping swans on the pond. We didn't even bother with that mess and resigned to driving around the surrounding fields, checking farms and waterways for more swans without any luck. Moving on!

After all that driving, it was time for some proper birding. We spent the last couple hours of daylight at North Lake Inbanuma, not in search of anything in particular. We viewed from the northwestern shore, which was quite birdy, though our attention would be fixed onto one bird for some time. We spotted a TERN flying over the lake, which we soon realized was one of the marsh terns (Whiskered, White-winged, or Black…in decreasing order of likelihood). Any of those would be a very good bird for February. I recalled a marsh tern being reported from a lake in Chiba in the preceding days, but do not think it had been identified with confidence; it was presumed a Whiskered based on likelihood. This was likely the same bird. Dave and I struggled in the field to put a name to it. This was a first-winter bird. We captured a bunch of images. Later that evening, after dinner, we scoured the internet for resources and realized it was a WHISKERED TERN. It was a nice lesson in basic-plumaged Chlidonias terns. While the tern monopolized our attention for a while, we did get to enjoy some of the other birds around the lake. FALCATED DUCKS were well-represented with a flock of 160, by far our highest count of that species for the trip. Three SMEW were scoped from a distance. A few more EASTERN MARSH-HARRIERS coursed over the reeds that lined the lake. We could have explored this place for a while longer, but we were losing light and we had to return the car by a certain time to get the reduced 12-hour rate. Our birding in Japan had come to an end. It was great to close out the trip with an unexpected bird and a bit of an ID challenge, especially after a day of pure ticking-and-running.

After returning the car, we walked to dinner near Haneda Inn where we had pizza at an Italian restaurant. I promise that the pizza was actually pretty good. Or maybe we were just sick of fish. Night at Haneda Inn.

February 19:
Dave and I took an early morning shuttle to HND for our flight back home, direct to JFK.
BIRD LIST, 181 full species per current eBird taxonomy:

Greater White-fronted Goose – two of these at Arasaki and two at Edosaki rice paddies

Taiga Bean-Goose – wintering flock of ~100 at Edosaki rice paddies

Tundra Bean-Goose – three at Arasaki

“Black” Brant – Biwase Observation Point

“Bewick’s” Tundra Swan – one near Yatsushiro, and a handful at Motono rice fields

Whooper Swan – common on Hokkaido; also two near Yatsushiro

Common Shelduck – common on Kyushu

Mandarin Duck – two at Karuizawa in stream along Kose-Rindo Road; flocks at Kogawa Dam and Kota Ponds

Baikal Teal – flock at Kota Ponds

Northern Shoveler – common Kyushu

Gadwall – a few on Kyushu

Falcated Duck – several locations on Kyushu; large flock on North Lake Inbanuma

Eurasian Wigeon – abundant Kyushu, less common elsewhere

Eastern Spot-billed Duck – abundant Kyushu, less common elsewhere

Mallard – abundant Kyushu and around Tokyo, less common Hokkaido

Northern Pintail – abundant Kyushu and around Tokyo, less common Hokkaido

“Eurasian” Green-winged Teal – common Kyushu, less common Hokkaido

Common Pochard – locally common Kyushu and Hokkaido

Tufted Duck – locally common Kyushu, Tokyo, and Hokkaido

Greater Scaup – Common Hokkaido, one around Tokyo

Harlequin Duck – common Hokkaido

“Stejneger’s” White-winged Scoter – scarce and local Hokkaido

Black Scoter – abundant Hokkaido

Long-tailed Duck – common Hokkaido

Common Goldeneye – common Hokkaido

Smew – two along Lake Akkeshi’s south shore

Common Merganser – common Hokkaido

Red-breasted Merganser – two at Yatsushiro, common Hokkaido

Red-throated Loon – uncommon Hokkaido

Arctic Loon – two Hokkaido

Pacific Loon – three Hokkaido

Little Grebe – common Kyushu and around Tokyo

Horned Grebe – one Kyushu, eight Hokkaido

Red-necked Grebe – eight Hokkaido

Great Crested Grebe – a few on Kyushu and around Tokyo

Eared Grebe – three Kyushu

Laysan Albatross – 10 from the ferry

Black-footed Albatross – 8 from the ferry

Short-tailed Albatross – 14 from the ferry

Streaked Shearwater – one from the ferry

Red-faced Cormorant – two immature at Cape Nosappu

Pelagic Cormorant – one from the ferry, abundant Hokkaido

Great Cormorant – common Kyushu and around Tokyo

Japanese Cormorant – two from the ferry; many likely roosting offshore at Yatsushiro, but weather conditions did not allow for identification

Gray Heron – common Kyushu and around Tokyo

Great Egret – common Kyushu and around Tokyo

Little Egret – common Kyushu and a few around Tokyo

Eurasian Spoonbill – scarce on Kyushu

Black-faced Spoonbill – nearly 30 individuals split between Izumi, Yatsushiro, and Sadowara Farm Ponds

Osprey – common Kyushu, a couple around Tokyo

Mountain Hawk-Eagle – two at Kogawa Dam

Eastern Marsh-Harrier – several individuals between Tone River, Ukishima Marsh and North Lake Inbanuma

Hen Harrier – one at Arasaki
Eurasian Sparrowhawk – one at Kogawa Dam
Northern Goshawk – one at Arasaki, one at Kogawa Dam
Black Kite – common everywhere
White-tailed Eagle – common Hokkaido
Steller’s Sea-Eagle – common Hokkaido
Eastern Buzzard – nine individuals spread throughout the trip
Brown-cheeked Rail – one at Arasaki
Ruddy-breasted Crake – two at Arasaki
Eurasian Coot – common Kyushu and around Tokyo
Sandhill Crane – a handful at Arasaki
White-naped Crane – abundant at Arasaki
Common Crane – a handful at Arasaki
Hooded Crane – abundant at Arasaki
“Common x Hooded” Crane hybrid – family group with backcrosses and several possible adults at Arasaki
Red-crowned Crane – a few during the day at Otowa Bridge, common at Tsurui Ito Crane Sanctuary
Black-bellied Plover – many at Yatsushiro
Northern Lapwing – small numbers around Arasaki, two east of Tokyo
Lesser Sand-Plover – one at Izumi, nine at Yatsushiro
Kentish Plover – common Yatsushiro, a few on mudflats at Izumi
Long-billed Plover – five at Sendai River at Satsuma
Little Ringed Plover – two at Izumi
Eurasian Curlew – 11 at Yatsushiro, one near Sadowara Farm Ponds
Dunlin – common Kyushu
Eurasian Woodcock – two in thickets along fields at Yatsushiro
Solitary Snake – two in stream behind 7-11 at Karuizawa, one in stream at Yuyado Daiichi
Common Snipe – eight at Arasaki
Common Sandpiper – uncommon Kyushu
Green Sandpiper – five on Kyushu

Common Greenshank – 16 at Yatsushiro
Common Redshank – one at Yatsushiro
Pomarine Jaeger – one from ferry
Common Murre – three Hokkaido
Thick-billed Murre – one Hokkaido
Pigeon Guillemot – both the snowi and columba forms on Nemuro Peninsula
Spectacled Guillemot – common Hokkaido
Ancient Murrelet – four Nemuro Peninsula
Japanese Murrelet – three from ferry
Least Auklet – three Notsuke Peninsula, four Nemuro Peninsula
Crested Auklet – one near Rausu
Black-legged Kittiwake – 18 from ferry
Saunders’s Gull – about 100 birds around Yatsushiro, four at Sadowara
Black-headed Gull – locally common everywhere
Black-tailed Gull – common from ferry and on Kyushu
“Kamchatka” Mew Gull – three from ferry, common Hokkaido, a few around Tokyo
“Vega” Herring Gull – common Honshu and Kyushu; one “Herring” Gull on Hokkaido was probably this form
“Mongolian” Herring Gull – one adult in breeding plumage at Yatsushiro
“Taimyr” Lesser Black-backed Gull – one at Izumi, at least four at Yatsushiro
Slaty-backed Gull – uncommon Kyushu, common Honshu, abundant Hokkaido
Glaucous-winged Gull – uncommon Hokkaido
Glaucous Gull – uncommon Hokkaido (all seemed very large and presumably the expected pallidissimus subspecies)
Whiskered Tern – one at North Lake Inbanuma
Rock Pigeon – common in urban environments
Oriental Turtle-Dove – common Kyushu and Honshu
White-bellied Pigeon – three at Lake Miike, feathered remains of one at Kogawa Dam
Blakiston’s Fish-Owl – one each at Yuyado Daiichi and Washino-yado

Ural Owl – one at day roost on Hokkaido

Short-eared Owl – two on Nemuro Peninsula in vicinity of Onnemoto bird hide

Common Kingfisher – five on Kyushu

Crested Kingfisher – one along Sendai River at Satsuma

Pygmy Woodpecker – common throughout

White-backed Woodpecker – one at Karuizawa, two at Lake Miike

Great Spotted Woodpecker – uncommon throughout

Japanese Woodpecker – five around Karuizawa, two at Lake Miike

Eurasian Kestrel – four on Kyushu

Peregrine Falcon – three on Kyushu

Ryukyu Minivet – two each at Kogawa Dam, Lake Miike, and Kota Shrine

Bull-headed Shrike – common Kyushu and around Tokyo

“Asian” Northern Shrike – one at Otowa Bridge

Eurasian Jay – small numbers in the woods on all three islands, including “Brandt’s” on Hokkaido

Azure-winged Magpie – two flyby flocks in the orchard-laden valley west of the Snow Monkey park

Daurian Jackdaw – eight immature birds with Rook flock on east side of “East fields” at Izumi/Arasaki

Rook – flocks of several hundred birds each at Arasaki

Carrion Crow – common all three islands

Large-billed Crow – common all three islands

Common Raven – two on Hokkaido

Eurasian Skylark – abundant Arasaki; some east of Tokyo

Barn Swallow – locally common on Kyushu

Asian House-Martin – abundant along Sendai River at Satsuma, and seen elsewhere on Kyushu

Coal Tit – a few in the woods at Karuizawa and Lake Miike

Varied Tit – common in woods on Honshu and Kyushu

Marsh Tit – reportedly common on Hokkaido, we stopped caring after we IDed our first one or two

Willow Tit – common Karuizawa

Japanese Tit – common on all three islands

Chinese Penduline-Tit – Euchi River reed beds at Arasaki

Long-tailed Tit – common all three islands, including caudatus on Hokkaido

Eurasian Nuthatch – present in woodlands on all three islands, each island with a different subspecies

Eurasian Treecreeper – a few at Karuizawa Wild Bird Forest

Eurasian Wren – one each at Karuizawa 7-11 (Honshu), Komenatsu River Reedbeds and Lake Miike (Kyushu), and Shunkunitai Nature Center (Hokkaido)

Brown Dipper – six along stream along Kose-Rindo Road

Brown-eared Bulbul – common to abundant on all three islands

Goldcrest – one at Kogawa Dam, two at Lake Miike

Japanese Bush Warbler – common in appropriate habitat on Kyushu

Zitting Cisticola – one at Euchi River reed beds

Japanese White-eye – common Kyushu and around Tokyo

Chinese Hwamei – one at Karuizawa 7-11

Red-flanked Bluetail – one Karuizawa Wild Bird Forest, one Kogawa Dam, four Lake Miike

Daurian Redstart – one at Karuizawa 7-11, scattered small numbers on Kyushu, and one at Tone River reed beds

Blue Rock-Thrush – one at Hachijojima ferry port, and a few scattered along the coast on Kyushu

White’s Thrush – two at Karuizawa 7-11, two at Lake Miike

Pale Thrush – small numbers Honshu and Kyushu

Brown-headed Thrush – one in woodlands north of Narita Hilton hotel

Izu Thrush – one at Hachijojima ferry port

Dusky Thrush – abundant on Kyushu and Honshu; common on Hokkaido

European Starling – one at Arasaki

White-cheeked Starling – common Kyushu and east of Tokyo
Japanese Accentor – one at Shitsubo Onsen Hotel in Karuizawa

“Green-headed” Eastern Yellow Wagtail – one at Arasaki

Gray Wagtail – seven total between various Kyushu sites

White Wagtail – common Honshu, abundant Kyushu, uncommon Hokkaido (some identifiable as “Black-backed” form)

Japanese Wagtail – three along Sendai River at Satsuma, one at Narita Hilton Hotel, one at North Lake Inbanuma

Olive-backed Pipit – six in rice paddies north of Satsuma, two incidental observations near Izumi, three at Lake Miike campground

Red-throated Pipit – three on consecutive days around Arasaki

“Siberian” American Pipit – (japonicus) common to abundant on Kyushu; also had a few in fields east of Tokyo

Bohemian Waxwing – two single-bird flyovers at Shunkunitai Nature Center

Japanese Waxwing – a dozen along Kose-Rindo Road at Karuizawa, and stumbled across five along a main road west of Karuizawa as we were driving to Snow Monkey Park

Meadow Bunting – fairly common Honshu and Kyushu, and one on Hokkaido

Chestnut-eared Bunting – three around Arasaki, two at Komenatsu River reed beds

Rustic Bunting – a few behind 7-11 at Karuizawa, one at North Lake Inbanuma

Yellow-throated Bunting – two behind 7-11 at Karuizawa, five at Lake Miike campground

Black-faced Bunting – common Arasaki and east of Tokyo

Gray Bunting – two skulky birds, a male and female, along road on west shore of Kogawa Dam

Reed Bunting – common around Arasaki and similar habitat on Kyushu; one along Tone River

Brambling – eight at 7-11 in Karuizawa, one at Wild Bird Forest in Karuizawa, and abundant around the fields at Arasaki

Hawfinch – one each at 7-11 and ISAK fields in Karuizawa

Japanese Grosbeak – 16 total between Karuizawa hotspots, and a few scattered on Kyushu

“Gray-bellied” Eurasian Bullfinch – four flying over main road east of Kushiro (griseiventris)

Asian Rosy-Finch – two flyovers at Rausu, flock of 48 coming to feeders on Cape Kiritappu

Oriental Greenfinch – common to abundant Honshu and Kyushu; we only had a few on Hokkaido

Russet Sparrow – a couple of large flocks around Izumi/Arasaki

Eurasian Tree Sparrow – abundant throughout

MAMMAL LIST:

Sable
Red Fox
Serow
Sika Deer
Japanese Macaque (“Snow Monkey”)

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