

Land of the Ice Birds, Winter in Japan.

Contributed by Jos
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Under the spell of winter, ice pack crashing into rocky headlands, Harlequins bobbing on turbulent waters to stunning backdrops of snow and ice, this was winter birding at its best - Steller's Sea Eagles, dancing Red-crowned Cranes, umpteen auks and auklets ...Hokkaido, northern Japan, the land of the ice birds!

Also incorporating the southern island of Kyushu and a 17-hour pelagic trip on the Pacific, this ten-day mini trip far exceeded my expectations ...from ice blocks to palm trees, it was fantastic throughout, with other highlights including the vast flocks of Hooded Cranes at Arasaki, Black-faced Spoonbills on a couple of estuaries and two unexpected Brown Boobies.

DAY LOG 5 March. The inevitable day of long-haul flights. A light dusting of snow as I left Lithuania just before midday, much the same in Helsinki an hour later, two Common Ravens the only birds seen. Next up, an early evening departure for the 10 hour non-stop flight to Japan. And so the trip was underway! 6 March. Tokyo - Oarai. The plan for this day was simple - arrive in Tokyo, take the train to Oarai on the east coast of Honshu and then wait for the 17 hour ferry boat that would take me through the rich Pacific waters to Hokkaido. With the time differences, it was after 10 a.m. when we landed in Tokyo and nearer to midday when I found myself on the train platform, ticket in hand. Two squawking Long-billed Crows the the first birds in Japan, Rock Dove coming a close second! To get to Oarai from Narita Airport there are none of these legendary Japanese bullet trains, but rather slow rattling local trains, trundling through lands of paddies and small towns. So, settling back on the heated seat, my first chances to see Japan and a few birds ... not too bad a selection from the windows, one Black-eared Kite amongst the haul, so too several Oriental Turtle Doves, a couple of White-eared Starlings and a selection of more familiar birds such as Little Grebe, Little Egret and Green Sandpiper. Oarai is a small provincial town and the massive MOL ferry was visible even as I stepped off the train, a port tower also rising above the town. With ubiquitous Tree Sparrows dotting the ten-minute walk, soon I was at the port, sorting out my ticket and dumping my bag behind the cashier for safe keeping, and then it was time for the birding to begin! With only three hours or so of light left to play, I decided upon a quick investigation of the fishing port to the immediate north and then a stroll towards a rivermouth about a couple of kilometres further, which I never actually got to. For my first encounter with Japanese gulls, the port was fun – lines of larids along the breakwaters, odd flocks drifting on the water or lounging nearer. Nothing too challenging for starters – Black-tailed Gulls in the main, but scattered amongst them plenty of Vega Gulls and smaller numbers of Slaty-backed Gulls. Also a few dozen Greater Scaup in the harbour, a couple of Black-necked Grebes and several Great Cormorants. Choshi Harbour, about 90 km further south, had been attracting up to ten species of gulls over the previous weeks, but my scans failed to produce any additional. I began to wander north, finding almost immediately a splendid Dusky Thrush feeding on the beach! Nice, I certainly didn't expect one of those on a pebble beach! It was later to turn out that Dusky Thrush is actually the default thrush, with good numbers seen across the country. Beyond, flocks of gulls seemed to be massing around the rivermouth. However, it was now late afternoon, the sun was definitely waning, a chill wind was cutting in from the cold grey sea and my enthusiasm was not exactly screaming for a drudge along the beach. Instead, encountering a small wooded hill, I decided to use the last hour of the day away from the sea …quite a good move, the hillside was actually a mosaic of pine, deciduous woodland and open scrub and a good little selection of birds so followed – three Black-faced Buntings in small bushes, one nice Brown-throated Thrush in the deciduous stuff and two more Dusky Thrushes in the pines. Japanese Tit, Oriental Turtle Dove and a Black-eared Kite also seen. And with that, as dusk fell, I turned and returned to the port. The ferry was scheduled to depart only at 01.45 a.m., but a warm waiting room gave good cover for writing my notes and, very considerate of the ferry company, you are permitted to board from 10 pm. Straight into my cabin I went, much anticipation what daylight would bring! 7 March. Oarai-Tomakomai Ferry

The Oarai-Tomakomai ferry runs a grand 750 km though the cold waters of the northern Pacific Ocean, offering great potential for some excellent pelagic birding, albatrosses and assorted auklets amongst the goodies possible. So it was, I woke a little before 7.00 a.m., we were steaming past the adjacent rocks and islands off Oshika Peninsula and the sun was streaming through my cabin window. On deck, blue skies all around and almost within seconds of stepping out, a pair of White-billed Divers flew down the port side of the boat and round the rear! Wow, what a start! Despite this dramatic start however, the first hour was actually very quiet – milling around the islands, a couple of Slaty-backed Gulls and hundreds of Black-tailed Gulls, precious little else. Just before 8.00 a.m., six small auks came zooming by, smart white eyebrows marking them out as Ancient Murrelets, then a little later the first Common Guillemots of the day. A pod of Pacific White-sided Dolphins cutting wave tops, flocks of Pacific Kittiwakes as we entered more open water, four more Ancient Murrelets. Another hour ticked by …pleasant, but still a rather low diversity of birds. Not so the next couple of hours though …again moderately close to the coast, suddenly birds started to materialise – large gatherings of Kamchatka Gulls drifting on the now millpond sea, flocks of Kittiwakes still present, plus too the only Vega Gulls of the journey and the occasional Slaty-backed Gulls. But here, a far greater attraction, auks! After a few unidentified fly-bys, suddenly I was in their midst - lines of Ancient Murrelets strung out across the ocean, at least 150 in all, plus 26 Rhinoceros Auklets sporting fine gonks and a good smatterings of Common Guillemots too. Four small pale-bellied auks zipped by at distance, chunky with yellowish beaks catching the sun, certainly Parakeet Auklets, but rather frustrating as they veered directly away. Also in this rich section, three Temminck's Cormorants and, near a fishing fleet that was attracting in thousands of Kamchatka and Black-tailed Gulls, one hyper-pale immature Glaucous Gull. More Pacific White-sided Dolphins, some Dall's Porpoises, one Short-finned Pilot Whale. Then like magic, the seas emptied of birds and for almost two hours, we cruised through waters that were beautifully calm, but amazing sparc of

birds – between 11.00 a.m. and 12.45 p.m., I saw a grand total of 11 Black-tailed Gulls, five Kamchatka Gulls and nine Common Guillemots! I began to worry if perhaps the day’s action was over, I had hoped to have seen a few shearwaters or similar by now! I needn’t have worried however, the bird that broke the quiet spell was an absolute corker – hugging low over the sea, arcing in from the north, a resplendent Laysan Albatross …yippee, I quietly yelped, this was one of the main birds I’d been wanting to see. A magnificent bird, in it came, flying directly by at good range, then vanishing off to the south. No sooner had it disappeared and suddenly yet more good birds were flying by, puzzling me at first in their chocolate browns of summer coat, Long-billed Murrelets, excellent stuff! It was now 1 p.m. and we had entered open water, the coastline no longer visible. From here on, I would see land no more and the birding just became better and better. Almost immediately, Crested Auklets began to appear, dumpy brown birds in dense flocks – a couple of packs numbering around 35 birds each, then a super flock of about 140, almost scoter-like in appearance as they scuttled low across the water. Pleasingly, six birds also sat on water as the ferry passed, allowing very fine views. Over the next three hours, a constant stream of birds past the boat, hundreds of Pacific Kittiwakes, a second Laysan Albatross, good numbers of Common Guillemots, at least three Brunnich’s Guillemots (and several more suspected) and, in many ways, one of the highlights of the trip, several exquisite Least Auklets. Always in pairs or small flocks, these would sit of the sea as the ferry approached, only flitting up at the last minute to fly a short distance away. Little crackers, I noted 19 in total, but given their diminutive size and all that I saw were right by the boat, I suppose a far greater number went unseen. By 4 p.m., things were quietening down, a last pair of Least Auklets scuttled up from the boat’s wake, but otherwise it was just Pacific Kittiwakes and Slaty-backed Gulls for the last hour of my watch. At 5 p.m., now feeling rather chilly after ten hours on deck, I decided to call it a day. Into my cabin I went, rather chuffed with the day’s haul! At 19.45, long after dark, we docked in Tomakomai. Popped into the train station to reserve train tickets for next morning, then checked into a hotel, one productive day over.

Species list:

- White-billed Diver – pair
- Laysan Albatross – 2
- Temminck’s Cormorant – 3
- Black-tailed Gull – numerous in early stages, scarce later.
- Kamchatka Gull – especially common mid-morning stage.
- Glaucous Gull - 1
- Vega Gull – 5
- Slaty-backed Gull – minimum 25, probably more.
- Pacific Kittiwake – 1190+
- Brunnich’s Guillemot – 3
- Common Guillemot – 90+
- Long-billed Murrelet – 18
- Ancient Murrelet – 160+
- Parakeet Auklet – 4
- Least Auklet – 19
- Crested Auklet – 215
- Rhinoceros Auklet – 27

8 March. Into the World of the Dancing Cranes.

Timewise and costwise, it made little difference whether I rented a car in Tomakomai or took the train to Kushiro in eastern Hokkaido and rented from there. Given there was always possibility that the roads could be blocked or affected by snow, I opted for the train.

So, Dusky Thrush, Brown-eared Bulbul and Tree Sparrows in the streets of Tomakomai, I then boarded the 7.00 a.m. eastbound train. Just outside Tomakomai, large flocks of Taiga Bean Geese dropping out of the sky to feed on snow-free patches adjacent to the train lines, but otherwise the journey was a relatively birdless meander through the pleasant hillsides of Hokkaido, the snow piled an amazing metre or two deep in most places. Two Sika Deer en route, then as we approached the coastal city of Kushiro, White-tailed Eagles began to appear, great dirty lumps hanging out on street lamp posts and girders. A taster of what was to come, Slaty-backed Gulls were everywhere and, in the last open fields before the sprawl of Kushiro unfolded, one exquisite pair of Red-crowned Cranes too, grandeur in white to a backdrop of snow. Right on time, at precisely 11.03, I departed the train, walked the few metres across the street to the car rental office and within minutes was driving off through the street. And 40 minutes later I was in the heart of the lands of the Red-crowned Crane. Very much a symbol of Japan, this bird came dangerously close to extinction in the 1950s, the population dropping to a mere 25 or so birds, all in this Kushiro heartland. Fortunately, led by local populations, conservation efforts have very much turned things around – the population is now expanding and currently stands at over 900. In winter, in several areas, local farmers and conservations have established feeding centres and it was at the most significant of this that I was now visiting, the Akin Crane Centre. With visitor centre, coffee shop and all the trimmings, the initial setting is not totally unlike Slimbridge, but navigating through the sight that unfolds is genuinely unique – from a lowered observation pit, you gaze out across a meadow bedecked in snow, low hills rising beyond. And upon that snow, lines of majestic Red-crowned Cranes serenade, honking calls drifting across the winter landscape. With many of the birds just metres away, towering above you, it truly is a breathtaking setting, around 80 Red-crowned Cranes in all, plus 140 Whooper Swans. For more than an hour, I stayed and watched, then suddenly like an

infectious wave, a bout of collective dancing erupted – two birds initially started prancing into the air, then within seconds the entire vista was a mass of jumping birds, pirouetting across the meadow in pairs and threes, black and white wings a flurry, long legs dangling, a musical cacophony of honks and yodels! As it quietened down, so commenced the event I had been waiting for – the daily feed at 2 p.m. Into the meadow, a guy clutching a bucket walked, into the sky appeared ominous great shapes of birds. From the bucket, he began tossing fish, Red-crowned Cranes stalked closer and began the feast. Then the spectacle began, the shapes in the sky were twofold - White-tailed Eagles and Black-eared Kites - and they were intent on a feast too. Bombarding through the packed cranes and not in the slightest bit wary of the gathered human observers a mere 100 metres or so from the action, repeatedly the raptors tried to snatch fish, muscling in on the crane flocks and doing their utmost to part crane and fish. For ten or fifteen minutes this performance played out, all of the four White-tailed Eagles eventually grabbing big enough morsels to so settle on the snow to feast. Ah, I think I had truly seen the cranes of Hokkaido now! As the last scraps of fish went down various gullets, I decided to part and head east to my main destination for the next days, the Nemuro Peninsula and environs. By now quite late in the day, my last plan for the day was to spend the hour around dusk at Hattaushi bridge, a famed site for Blakiston's Fish Owl. Something however was not going according to plan - as I approached, fog rolled in and temperatures dropped to around zero. I did not hold out great hope for any owls! One White-backed Woodpecker appeared in a tree, one Eurasian Treecreeper too, but as darkness fell, all remained quiet and still. Then, raising hope for a while, the distinctive calls of Blakiston's Fish Owl began, a deep hoo hoo a little up the slope from the stream. It was not to be however, a brief few moments of calling and all returned to silence. It was cold, it was wet, I decided to depart. I had planned to stay at the well-know Furen Lodge this evening, but not having done my homework very well, I only had a hazy idea of where it was! And where I thought it was turned out to be just a line of everyday looking houses – on this dark foggy night, nothing resembling a hotel or lodge jumped out. A couple of circuits of the immediate area and I gave up on the search and drove instead to Nosappa-misaki, the easternmost headland of Hokkaido. Here at dawn, if the fog cleared, I had high hopes of a stunning start. Out came my sleeping bag, so ended the day. 9 March. The Nemuro Peninsula. Nossapa-misaki, eastern Hokkaido. The fog had dispersed overnight to produce what can only be described as a spectacular dawn ...glancing out from my sleeping bag, the lighthouse towering adjacent, the sun was just rising over a gently dappled landscape of pack ice churning up against the rocks of the headland, abundant seaduck bobbing in gaps between the ice and, just breathtaking, four Steller's Sea Eagles and one White-tailed Eagle sat atop a bloodstained chunk of ice flow plucking the fresh corpse of a scoter, Large-billed Crows looking on with intent. Truly an atmospheric start like no other! As I gathered myself together and winched the scope into place, the stunning reality of this place further crystallised – scattered across the sea in great rafts, there were Harlequin Ducks and Black Scoters in their thousands, Long-tailed Ducks, Red-breasted Mergansers, Goosanders and Common Goldeneyes all alongside in lesser numbers. You could almost have cried! Slaty-backed and Glaucous-winged Gulls drifting about, two White-winged Scoters flying past, one Black-necked Grebe on the sea, plenty to keep me occupied for a good few hours.

With this headland one of the top sites in all Japan for auk species, a potential ten or so possible, I spent quite a lot of time scanning the stretches of water between and beyond the ice. Fortunately, I had managed an impressive haul on the ferry crossing a couple of days earlier because the number of auks present on this day was very low ...quality however was not lacking – of the total of 28 auks seen, 26 were Spectacled Guillemots in their full summer dress, one was a Pigeon Guillemot and the last an Ancient Murrelet. If I had been greedy, a couple of puffins would have been nice too! Still, as I watched the Harlequins in their colours up against the rocks and as yet another Steller's Sea Eagle drifted by, I could really say this was one of the best mornings of birding I have had for a very long time! One Ringed Seal bobbed just offshore, a Sea Otter basked on a slab of ice. Finally dragging myself away from Nossapa-misaki, I cruised around a few small harbours on the peninsula (mostly frozen, but otherwise full of assorted gulls and occasional dabbling ducks) and then stopped for for a short while at the seaward end of Furen-ko. Though totally frozen in mid-winter, vestiges of the coming spring thaw now revealed moderate expanses of open water in the lower reaches. Flocks of Whooper Swans and Eurasian Wigeons mingled with Goosanders, a mass of gulls including large numbers of both Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls, two Red-crowned Cranes paddled in the shallows. I did not stay long however – I wanted to explore the small sand spit at the north end of the lake, a drive of about half an hour from where I was. Quite nice it was, a slither of land about 10 km in length, the waters of the north Pacific sat to the one side, the frozen expanses of Furen-ko to the other. Amazing for the numbers of Sika Deer in particular, hundreds and hundreds of them were congregating all the way down the spit, regular little groups trotting across the ice, large herds gathering aside the road where traces of grass poked out from the snow. Not at all bad for birds either – 12 Smew on the river at the head of the spit, a smart male Falcated Duck bobbing on the sea with Harlequins, regular Steller's Sea Eagles dotting roadside posts or lounging on the adjacent ice. Finding the end of the spit blocked by considerable depths of snow, I turned instead to the small village of Hashirikotan midway down the spit. Basically three or four streets clustered around an ice-locked harbour, the village would hardly been worthy of a second glance, but stunning it was – an impromptu raptor capital of the region! A few scrawny cats strutted about, no doubt keeping one eye on the sky, two or three folk worked on boats at the harbour, others sat scattered across the ice, huddled over little holes to trying to catch fish. All however were outnumbered by raptors – in the village itself, a flock of at least 90 Black-eared Kites were bombarding a bulldozed heap of snow; out on the ice, dozens of White-tailed Eagles and Steller's Sea Eagles sat sentinel, many in little clusters around the fishermen. It was quite a sight, but the best of the lot was not a raptor – feeding in a parking lot near the harbour with several Tree Sparrows, I stumbled across four splendid Asian Rosy Finches! Before departing the spit, I also found a Fieldfare. To a backdrop of Steller's Sea Eagles and Sika Deer, this bird should have barely deserved a second glance for a birder now resident in eastern Europe (the species even breeds in my garden), but I sure hadn't been expecting this species on Hokkaido. A quick check of literature and a little subsequent research, it turns out that Fieldfare is accidental in East Asia as a whole and this is only about the tenth ever for Japan! Typical, I find a major

rarity and it has to be a bird that is basically a back garden bird for me! Anyhow, the day was edging towards its end, a stop in woodland added Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, caudatus Long-tailed Tit, asiatica Eurasian Nuthatches and a flock of Bramblings. Then it was back to Hattaushi Bridge for a second attempt on Blakiston's Fish Owl. It truly would have been the icing to the sugar to have rounded the day off with the owl, but again the weather was conspiring against me on this one – it had been non-stop sunshine until about 3 p.m., a bank of high cloud then rolling in. Now however, exactly at the wrong moment, the weather broke. Just as a Ural Owl started to call and I expected the Blakiston's Fish Owls to follow suit, it began to rain! Within minutes, it was absolutely lashing it down, so ended attempt number two on the owls! Departing, heavy rain seemed set for the duration, I drove to Ochiishi on the south side of the Nemuro Peninsula and called it quits, what an amazing day it had been! 10 March. The Nemuro Peninsula. Overnight rain had stopped by dawn, but in its place dark leaden skies and a humongous wind whipping in off the Pacific. With thoughts of potential seawatching, and hopes of a Red-faced Cormorant, my first destination for the day was Ochiishi-misaki, a lighthouse a few kilometres south of Ochiishi town and, critically for the weather, situated on a south-facing headland. The direct route to this point requires a walk of about a kilometre through pine forest, but with snow piled up rather deeply in the cover of the forest, I had to take the longer more circular route across the windswept headland – and with temperatures near zero and a chill blast ripping through, it was not exactly the most pleasant of ambles! Lots of Sika Deer however and fortunately the roofed shelter of the lighthouse provided a little haven to watch the sea (this, as I was to find out the next day, would not be applicable for winds with a westerly bite). Still, there I was, recovering somewhat from the battering that the elements had just thrown at me, when I did my first scan of the sea. Glorious it was, Harlequins and Black Scoters riding the considerable surf, a flock of Long-tailed Ducks battling to make headway against the wind, a lone Red-necked Grebe bobbing up and down. Of even more interest however, funnelling through the great troughs in the turbulent sea, a light but steady passage of birds moving east – Ancient Murrelets in the main, small flocks passing every now and then, perhaps 60 birds or so over a couple of hours. Also six Brunnich's Guillemots, three Spectacled Guillemots, three Least Auklets and a minimum of 16 Pacific Divers and three Red-throated Divers, several more distant divers remaining unidentified. Punctuated by regular eye-to-eyes with passing Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles, both hanging in the wind just metres away at the cliff edge, it truly made for a stunning seawatch! Also Slaty-backed Gulls and Glaucous Gulls drifting by almost continuously, a pod of nine Black-necked Grebes and no shortage of Pelagic Cormorants. Scan and squint as much as I could however, not a hint of a Red-faced Cormorant did I find!

Given the prevailing south-easterlies, I thought seawatching off Nossapa-misaki might be even better, so at about 10 a.m., I again struck out from cover and made a bolt for the car, a rather speedier return with the wind directly behind me! One Peregrine scooted by. A quick stop at Ochiishi Bay was rewarded with mass ranks of Black Scoters and 12 White-winged Scoters, plus a lot of Glaucous Gulls. Then I drove to Nossapa-misaki. Hmm, the wind was absolutely battering the headland – the seawatching hide was (probably rather wisely) locked and so I angled my car to watch the bay as well as I could. What a change from the day before, the sea ice had been pushed far to the north and in its place a maelstrom of unfriendly looking waters. My car was rocking back and fro and I wondered for a while whether it might actually tip over. A flag pole that the day before had had a Japanese flag proudly flapping away, a symbol against the Russian-occupied Kuril Islands just offshore, was now bare – torn little withers all that was left, this was a mighty wind indeed! Needless to say, I didn't see very much and in an hour or so, I successfully managed to identify just one Ancient Murrelet, four Spectacled Guillemots and one Crested Auklet! A pair of Smew also flew past. By early afternoon, heavy rain joined the cocktail, so I hightailed it out and embarked on the 160 km drive to Rasau, conditions worsening steadily as I progressed north, finally the rain turning to snow and beginning to accumulate. Arriving at Washinoyado, the locality famous for Blakiston's Fish Owl, the adjacent sea was solid pack ice, snow was piled two metres deep along the roads from earlier falls and a considerable fresh carpet was adding to it! I seriously wondered (a) what chance there would be of seeing an owl in such conditions and (b) would I be able to get out again? However, the owner of the owl area had the answer – I couldn't stay! With the forecast promising the road blocked by morning, I had to leave. No owls! Well, that was a bit of a spanner in the works, Washinoyado is the key site for Blakiston's Fish Owl, the birds come to take strategically placed fish and are near guaranteed! Or usually so, clearly not on this day! It was now getting dark, but with no better plan I decided to drive all the way back to the Nemuro Peninsula. And what a drive it was! Some dodgy moments in the snow early on, but it wasn't the wind and snow, later switching back to rain, that worried me so much, but the mighty waves crashing in from the sea – for long stretches the road runs parallel to the coast and howling great waves were smashing down on my car with regularity, each time reducing visibility to zero and pushing the car shudderingly to the side. Phew, I was rather relieved when I eventually got back to the Nemuro Peninsula! Finding a sheltered spot, I rolled the car seat back and called it a day, one Red Fox trotted past. 11 March. The Nemuro Peninsula.

Blizzard over, mostly sun and high cloud throughout the day ...but exceptionally windy, a south-westerly gale battering the headlands. My plan for this day had been to wake up and have a celebratory breakfast at Washinoyado, patting myself on the back for such gripping views of the owls, then spent the day exploring Rausu Harbour and perhaps the Notsuke Peninsula. Of course however, the reality was I now far to the south with an unexpected extra day on the Nemuro Peninsula! Arriving at Hattaushi Bridge at 5 a.m., I still managed to miss dawn, so saw a Hazel Grouse aside the stream instead of any owls. I then decided to spend the day looking for Red-faced Cormorants, beginning with a return to Ochiishi-misaki ...but gee, with a change in the wind, the previously excellent shelter was now in the full blast of the wind! Rough seas, almost no notable passage. There was however a large gathering of Pelagic Cormorants on a cliff face just to the east, there just had to be a Red-faced Cormorant amongst them I thought! On a nice calm day, viewing this cliff would have been a simplicity, I would merely needed to have sat on the nice grassy slope and scope across to them. In this buffeting wind however I was rather concerned that I would simply get blown off! Try as I might – standing,

sitting, lying flat on my stomach, I simply could not get an angle where I could both see the cliff and keep my scope still enough to scan through them! A flock of about 30 Pelagic Cormorants departed from the cliff an hour or so later, one possible Red-faced Cormorant seemed to be in their midst. However, with the sun angle and wind not conducive to better chances to observe, I decided to depart and return later in the day. After a stint in Ochiishi harbour, photographing the gulls, I moved round to Nossapa-misaki for another try there. Also very little movement on the very rough sea, but again a large gathering of cormorants, this time on a rock pinnacle just north of the lighthouse. Here, and across all the sites visited today, a massive influx of Bramblings had occurred, many thousands pouring in, flocks feeding on this exposed headlands and aside roads wherever the snow had retreated a few centimetres. So, as the car rocked about, I sat and waited ...photographing Bramblings sheltering beneath tussocks, watching the cormorants come and go on the pinnacle. Two hours on, a scan across the birds gathered and there he was, a solitary Red-faced Cormorant amongst the many Pelagics! Ah success, the last of my remaining targets on Hokkaido had fallen ...bar the owl of course! For much the rest of the day I pottered about, visiting various bays and harbours and struggling out to the lighthouse at Ochiishi again where the cliff certainly held no Red-faced Cormorants in the end. Concluding the day, I returned to the now familiar Hattaushi Bridge. Still windy, I didn't expect very much ...and surprise surprise, didn't see very much either! As darkness fell, I left the area, driving to the hinterlands of Kushiro. At dawn, wind, rain or blizzard permitting, a treat would await me. 12 March. Setsurigawa River, Tsuru-ito Sanctuary & Akin.

Picture perfect at dawn, not a cloud in the sky, not a breath of wind. A little after 5 a.m. at Setsurigawa Bridge, the skies a delicious orange, the cool waters of the river flowing beneath ... in front of me, in a land still bedecked in snow, a quite wonderful sight – decorating islands mid-channel, little groups of Red-crowned Cranes waking up. Preening, engaging in a little display, plodding out into the shallows to silhouette against the gathering light of day, this is one of the iconic settings of northern Japan. Alongside, several photographers were happily clicking away, directly up the channel and over the bridge, one smart Crested Kingfisher came, calling loudly as it went. After a couple of days of storms and wind, this was really a nice way to conclude my Hokkaido experience. As the cranes roused and began to depart, so too did I, driving the few kilometres to Tsuru-ito Sanctuary to await the morning feeding of the cranes. Toured the village while waiting, garden feeders attracting Brown-eared Bulbuls, plenty of Marsh Tits and a few Great Spotted Woodpeckers, then I settled down for the second crane treat of the morning. Flying in from several sides, a treat against the stunning blue skies, Red-crowned Cranes dropped down on the open meadow, masses of dance bouts breaking out, a little concern amongst them when a Red Fox came trotting through. At 9 a.m., a guy arrived pushing a sledge, across the field he zigzagged, dumping grain as he went – breakfast time for the cranes! Only 18 cranes here, but most picturesque it was. Also saw a very nice male Daurian Redstart nearby. I did not have a massive amount of time at my disposal today – at 1.30 p.m., I was due to fly out. However, looking at the weather, it seemed a real shame not to squeeze in another visit to the Akin Crane Centre, the possibilities for photography excellent at this sight. So off I went, my last couple of hours on Hokkaido were spent gazing into the eyes of Whooper Swans and Red-crowned Cranes at Akin, superb birds on sparkling snow. Magic. And with that, I zipped off to Kushiro Airport, dumped my rental car and smiled at the massive sculpture of Blakiston's Fish Owls that greet you at departures ...quite obviously the Japanese authorities are sympathetic to wannabe owl-spotters and unsuccessful twitchers! From Kushiro, it was a two-hour flight to Tokyo, then another two hours to Kagoshima, a city at the southern end of Kyushu island. Arrived at 18.40, picked up another hire car and set off into the night. 13 March. Arasaki & Yatsushiro.

Arriving at Arasaki late in the evening, the total silence was a little worrying – numerous reports speak of atmospheric nights to a backdrop of the calls of cranes. But here, at the key wintering site of many thousands of Hooded Cranes and several hundred White-naped Cranes, I heard not a peep all night. Had I left it a little late in the season? Had they all migrated? Waking at 5.00 a.m., a little confused why it was still pitch black, it took me a few moments to appreciate that Kyushu is not only much further south than Hokkaido, but also much further west – sunrise and sunset are basically an hour later! So, sitting there in the dark, pondering the silence outside, I was rather pleased when the first traces of orange began to flood the sky and, simultaneously, the unmistakable cries of cranes began to echo out. Within moments, the sky was full of noise and wings ...hundreds of cranes, then thousands and thousands, were falling out of the sky, spirally downward to settle in the rice paddies beside the Arasaki crane centre. Where they had spent the night I do not know, but now the spectacle was simply awesome! As the sun broke the horizon, flocks continued to pour in, the dark shapes now transforming into identifiable birds – Hooded Cranes. Jam-packed into a patch of paddies barely the size of a couple of football pitches, it was a mad scrum of birds, a carpet of slate grey stretching far, countless heads and necks poking up ...never have I seen quite so many cranes in such a small area! As the sun rose yet further and the flock expanded ever more, I relocated a little to view from another angle. Within this mass of birds, there should also be a thousand of so White-naped Cranes and possibly a Common Crane or two, perhaps Sandhill Crane too. With the birds packed so densely however, it was actually very difficult to sift through the birds – I was now looking at perhaps 10,000 Hooded Cranes, a figure representing about 80-90% of the global population, but where were the White-naped Cranes? After a while, finally finding only a single individual, I had to conclude that these indeed had probably already begun their migration. The one White-naped Crane I did see however was quite a stunner – taller and more elegant than the Hooded Cranes, I was quite happy that at least this individual had been good enough to delay his migration for me! At about 8 a.m., the reason for their mass congregation appeared, a truck that trundled up the embankments through the paddies disgorging vast quantities of grain. And the feeding frenzy that followed was impressive – Hooded Cranes shoulder to shoulder, masses of Rooks squeezing into gaps on the fringes, yet more birds still flying in. Quite how I spotted them, I am not sure, but also found two Eurasian Cranes in their midst and had a very smart Sandhill Crane stalk straight through my scope view on one occasion. I managed to relocate the Eurasian Cranes a few times, and a couple of Eurasian-Hooded Crane hybrids, but never again did I see the Sandhill Crane – pretty much the same size as the Hooded Cranes, once he had

vanished into the pack, that was it! By 9 a.m., with most feeding over, the cranes began to spill out into neighbouring paddies and also to paddies beyond the nearby river. Hooded Cranes would be my constant companions for the whole day, but their departure from the feeding site also served as cue for me to widen my activities ...plenty more birds to also see at Arasaki! Dusky Thrushes by the dozen, Japanese Skylarks singing high on the wing, flocks of Oriental Greenfinch commonplace, Daurian Redstarts flitting along edges of scrubby ditches. Nice birds all, but even better, one of the first birds I found was a Chestnut-eared Bunting feeding at the edge of a paddy field, suitably backed up by rather more abundant Meadow Buntings and Black-faced Buntings. Along the reeded fringes of a river loop north-west of the crane centre, Pallas's Reed Bunting and a very smart Green Pheasant were, plus a couple of Bull-headed Shrikes, more Daurian Redstarts and my first Red-bellied Rock Thrush of the trip (more to follow in subsequent days). All in all, the next few hours were just fantastic, Hooded Cranes everywhere, spirals of Black-eared Kites overhead, cocktails of familiar and unfamiliar birds at every turn – Ospreys, Northern Lapwings, Oriental Turtle Doves, Japanese Bush Warblers, plus many more. A slight disappointment came with the discovery of two spoonbills roosting in a wet ditch – I had high hopes of a black face peering up at me when I checked them out, but alas they were both Eurasian Spoonbills ...not a bad species, but in the Far East they could have been even more exciting! Departing middle afternoon, I then travel north to Yatsushiro. Arriving at 4 p.m., I was delighted to find I had timed it just perfect for the falling tide. Peering over the seawall, a mere slither of mudflat was exposed and birds were already congregating after their highwater roost. Lots of Grey Plovers, bucketloads of Kentish Plovers, a few Marsh Sandpipers, two Terek Sandpipers, dozens of Dunlins and Red-necked Stints, single Greenshanks and Far Eastern Curlews, but far better were the birds hawking the mud and looping back over the sea wall itself ...the very birds I had hoped to see were flying around directly over my head – Saunder's Gulls! Cracking little things, they were basically dainty little gulls that looked and behaved very much as marsh terns. A rare species with a global population of perhaps as few as 15,000 birds, it was pleasing indeed to see about 40 hawking back and fro, several in full summer plumage.

Also here, my only Black-headed Gulls of the trip, a male Falcated Duck, a group of about 25 roosting Black-crowned Night Herons and good flocks of Black-eared Kites. The best was still to come however – as the tide began to recede and the sun headed towards the horizon, a flock of five birds flew in from the west. Five big white birds, big white birds with honking great bills with spoons at the end! And so they landed on the mud directly in front, five superb Black-faced Spoonbills! A globally endangered species, this was just the icing to the cake, what a fantastic day it had been. The sun was setting, the Black-faced Spoonbills paddled in the shallows surrounded by masses of Grey Herons and Great White Egrets. I retreated from the sea wall, time to find somewhere to sleep.

14 March. Yatsushiro, Hikawa Bridge & Kadogawa Harbour. Back on the Yatsushiro River at dawn – Daurian Redstarts and Red-bellied Rock Thrushes on the seawall, Buff-bellied Pipits, Dusky Thrushes and Oriental Turtle Doves in the meadows, but on the mudflats a very similar selection to that of the day before. Interestingly however, the Black-faced Spoonbills present appeared to be a new set of birds – scattered across the estuary, no less than seven birds were feeding in the shallows (a pair, a group of four and a single), but the flock of five the day before had included a ringed individual, it was certainly not present today! If so, that would put 12 birds on the estuary, a number representing approximately 0.5% of the global population! No Saunder's Gulls this morning though. From Yatsushiro, my plan was to cut across the central mountains of Kyushu to reach Kadogawa on the east coast. Selecting Route 443 for the early stages, I spent quite some time exploring the parallel Hikawa River and forested slopes on either side. Picturesque with blossom already in the small villages, it was also not bad at all for birds – regular stops along the river soon added the desired Mandarin Ducks and Brown Dippers, while the associated forest fringes added Japanese White-eyes, Ryukyu Minivets and Varied Tits, along with more abundant Japanese Tits, japonensis Goldcrests and kiusiensis Long-tailed Tits. Perhaps the nicest find however was a flock of buntings in a scrubby field near the top of the valley – associating with Oriental Greenfinches and Tree Sparrows, the flock included at least 35 Meadow Buntings and 15 Elegant Buntings, the latter birds including some very fine males in vivid yellow headwear. Also here, a Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker and, in pines nearby, a Rustic Bunting. Having meandered along various sideroads, I eventually arrived at Kadogawa Harbour in the middle of the afternoon. I did not have high expectations of seeing my main target here and I was correct in my expectations – despite checking a couple of headlands and searching the harbour quite extensively, I did not find any Japanese Murrelets, a regional speciality that breeds on offshore islands in this region. The harbour area was however quite a nice area – a lot of common ducks on a side river, heaps of Black-eared Kites hanging around and massing on fish frames in the outer harbour, dozens and dozens of herons, egrets and cormorants. Scanning through this lot, totals approximately equated to minimums of 85 Grey Herons, 20 Great White Egrets, 80 Little Egrets, one Pacific Reef Heron and 30 Temminck's Cormorants. One Osprey also present and plenty of Vega Gulls and Black-tailed Gulls. Much as with the Blakiston's Fish Owl on Hokkaido, the Japanese seemed to have developed a sense of humour to rub in when you miss a bird – in fine fashion, the entire harbour wall at Kadogawa has been painted with colourful murals by local schoolchildren. In various states of abstractness, a hundred Japanese Murrelets peer out of the wall at you!

I had considered staying overnight at Kadogawa to try again for the murrelet at dawn, but I didn't really rate my chances too high, so instead I turned at dusk and drove south. There was still one big target for me before I was due to leave Japan – built like a Hawfinch on steroids, the bird I wanted to find was Japanese Grosbeak. With this in mind, I drove to Lake Mi-ike and slept quite nearby, hopefully this bird would mark the new day. 15 March. Mi-ike & Kagoshima Coast. Rain at dawn, pretty much staying the same most of the morning! The apparently beautiful settings of Mi-ike Lake lay shrouded in low cloud, alternating drizzle and heavier rain leaving all drenched and dripping. On the

lawns of the lakeside campsite, Olive-backed Pipits pattered around growing puddles, Pale Thrushes and Carrion Crows too. Seeking shelter under the roof of an open-sided camp kitchen, there I stayed for an hour, roving flocks of small birds moving through the trees with regularity – Japanese Tits and Varied Tits in the main, Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers on occasion, Japanese White-eyes now and then. A flock of Bramblings appeared on the lawn, Spot-billed Ducks paddles offshore. The weather was not showing signs of improvement, but seeing my chances of Japanese Grosbeak slipping away, I decided to take a walk anyhow. Thoughts of scrambling up the slippery slopes into the gloom of the higher hills certainly did not appeal, so instead I undertook the path circumnavigating the lake – despite the rain, a lot of birds seen: Japanese Tits and Japanese White-eyes almost all the way round, Varied Tits quite frequently, sometimes flocks of Long-tailed Tits. A landslip had blocked part of the path requiring a lot of scrambling through and over wet vegetation, protruding roots and mud slopping over sodden trunks …yuk! Midway though this though, a good-sized flock appeared, the landslip providing a forest-edge effect and good viewing conditions – all the usual contenders present, Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers and Eurasian Nuthatches included, but also one Japanese Green Woodpecker, two Ryukyu Minivets and, slipping through dense vegetation, one Red-billed Leiothrix (as a social species, presumably others were present too). Getting back to the car however, I still had not seen Japanese Grosbeak! Driving to a nearby slightly higher shrine, the conditions were even worse – a dark eerie fog was virtually turning day to night, visibility was non-existent. I did not bother getting out of the car! Reasoning it might be drier at lower altitudes, I reluctantly left Mi-ike, knowing it probably meant the end of any hope of Japanese Grosbeak. Remarkably, 5km beyond Mi-ike the weather was indeed better – whilst still heavily overcast, it was at least dry. Even more remarkable, another 10 km on, I stumbled across a very fine flock of birds: stopping to check birds on roadside wires, I was quite impressed to find no less than 80 Russet Sparrows feeding in small fields aside the road, about 25 Oriental Greenfinches with them. And then, a flash of a larger bird dropping down to the verge alongside. Stone me, a Japanese Grosbeak! Then another, and another, and then a whole flock of them! I was staggered! After trudging around in the rain all morning looking for them, I was now watching a magnificent flock of about 45 Japanese Grosbeaks!!! I truly had not expected to find them in agricultural areas, nor for that matter a large flock of them, even less with Russet Sparrows, themselves quite a localised species. Well that was good! Now early afternoon and with no real plan for the remainder of the day (other than a flight out in the evening), I decided to randomly select a coastal site near Kagoshima Airport and see if I could notch up a last species or two, perhaps a Barn Swallow or Asian House Martin I thought. Looking at the map, a stretch just south of Kirishima City looked interesting – not only was it the closest patch of accessible coast, but it also appeared to consist of several pools adjacent to the sea, clustered either side of a rivermouth. Almost immediately I understood I was onto a good thing – initial drainage ditches held Moorhens and Common Snipes, both new species for the trip, the river held assorted gulls and dabbling ducks. However, peering over the seawall, I could really see that I had hit the jackpot! Dozens of Temminck's Cormorants on small rock outcrops, 40 or so Grey Herons on the mudflats, a selection of waders including a Far Eastern Curlew and, an exquisite centrepiece, seven superb Black-faced Spoonbills preening at the water edge. I had not expected this, a wonderful finale to my Japanese experience I thought, as I clicked my last photograph of the trip. Watching the birds for a while, I spied a very distant bird flying over the sea …’hmm’, odd I thought, ‘I could swear that is a booby!’ This species was not on my radar at all, but as I squinted to get detail, two cracking Brown Boobies flew directly over my head! Wow, I really couldn't get better than that – Brown Boobies over the top of Black-faced Spoonbills! With my time running out, I continued along the seawall a little further. A few Buff-bellied Pipits, several Dusky Thrushes, one Red-bellied Rock Thrush …and yet more surprises! With the original flock still in view, the first birds I found were five more Black-faced Spoonbills, these roosting on a reed-fringed pool. I had now encountered as many as 24 Black-faced Spoonbills on this trip, quite stunning! Just nearby, an Eastern Water Rail appeared at the edge of reeds and, my last unexpected bird of the trip, a female Hen Harrier quartered rank meadow beyond. Barn Swallows zoomed along the seawall. With that, I turned and drove to Kagoshima Airport. Leaving the rental car, I checked in for my domestic flight back to Tokyo. On time departure at 7.30 p.m., two hours later I was in Tokyo.

16 March.

With no real need to be at the airport for my flight back to Europe before 10.00 a.m., I had possibility to nip into a local park or patch of woodland for a last quick session of birding in Japan – many birders visit parks in Narita very close to the airport where Brown-headed Thrush is possible. However, I quite fancied Black-faced Spoonbills with Brown Boobies flying above them as my final memories of the country, so I opted instead for a lazy morning catching up with notes. From the airport windows, Tree Sparrows scrubbing about, Large-billed Crow flying over. Boarding my flight in Tokyo at midday, by the magic of time zones, I was back in Europe in time to go to work the same afternoon. Oh joy! More information about this trip:[CLICK HERE](#) for the full list of birds and mammals seen on this trip.[CLICK HERE](#) for costs and practical details on visiting Japan (not active yet).