

# THE TRAVELLING NATURALIST

TRAVEL | EXPERIENCE | CONSERVE



## JAPAN

### Japan's Spectacular Winter Wildlife

26 November – 10 December 2016



Blakiston's

*fish owl – the world's largest owl. Hokkaido, December 2016. © Barrie Cooper*

## TOUR REPORT

**Leader: Barrie Cooper**

### Summary

An excellent trip to Japan in winter. We saw some excellent wildlife and had privileged views of some endangered species of birds. The hotels, food and transport arrangements were first class and helped to make it such a pleasurable holiday. Japan is a wonderful country and it really should be high on the wishlist of travellers. For birdwatchers there are some wonderful species to be seen and great memories are guaranteed.

### Highlights

- Privileged views of the world's largest owl - Blakiston's fish owl. A globally endangered species that was seen several times just five metres away.
- Five species of cranes – red-crowned, hooded, white-naped, sandhill and common.
- Excellent views of Steller's sea eagle – the world's largest sea eagle.
- Good views of charismatic species such as red-flanked bluetail.
- Some endemic species of birds and mammals, including Japanese accentor, Japanese woodpecker and Japanese black woodpigeon.
- Japanese macaques – snow monkeys bathing in a geothermal pool.
- Beautiful landscapes.
- Excellent hotels and food.

### Day 1: Saturday 26 November

#### Depart UK

The group assembled at Heathrow Airport and the British Airways flight to Tokyo departed on time.

### Day 2: Sunday 27 November

#### River Hitotsuse

*Rain, approximately 14 degrees maximum*

The BA flight arrived ten minutes early which was useful because we had to go through passport control and collect our luggage before meeting Kaz, our local guide, and then moving onto the domestic terminal for our two hour flight south to Miyazaki on the island of Kyushu.

After a pleasant lunch at an airport restaurant we boarded our minibus in the hope of doing some birding. Unfortunately, persistent rain rather hampered things. Nevertheless we did a couple of hours of decent birding along the River Hitotsuse and saw an interesting mix of species without leaving the bus. Great, intermediate and little egrets plus grey herons were some of the most obvious first birds we saw. Wildfowl were pintail, Eurasian wigeon, mallard, spot-billed duck and red-breasted merganser. A couple of Vega gull were on the river, plus great cormorant. Telegraph wires proved to be useful perching sites for Oriental turtle dove, dusky thrush, Eurasian tree sparrow, rook and Daurian jackdaw. Raptors were interesting with plenty of black-eared kites, an Eastern marsh harrier and a splendid osprey that made an unsuccessful fishing attempt just forty metres from the bus. Perhaps the most interesting sighting was five distant spoonbills on the opposite side of the river with at least two of them appearing to be black-faced spoonbill alongside their larger Eurasian cousin. So despite the weather, we had an interesting introduction to birds on Kyushu. We then made an interesting drive along the coast through some beautiful scenery to our hotel in Hyuga and a chance to catch up on some of the sleep we had missed since leaving the UK.

**Day 3: Monday 28 November****Umagase headland, River Hitotsuse & Lake Mi-ike**

*Sunny all day, approximately 16 degrees maximum*

In contrast to the miserable weather of yesterday, we had beautiful blue skies all day and a few barn swallows outside the hotel reflected a more summery feel despite the early morning chill. We made a brief drive to the beautiful Umagase headland with its basalt pillars dropping down to the Pacific Ocean. It was a spectacular setting and a pair of peregrines soared around for much of the time we spent there to add to the ambience of the place. Many black-eared kites were around and some gave close views. A flock of Japanese white-eyes showed well before our main target appeared – the endangered black woodpigeon. Approximately six individuals were seen in flight but not perched in trees. A Pacific reef egret gave a very brief appearance but a male red-bellied rock thrush generously gave us two brief views. An osprey flew across the headland before a Ryuku minivet showed well at the top of a tree. Temminck's cormorant, Vega gull and Japanese bush warbler were also seen there.

While driving to our next destination a beautiful Daurian redstart and a pair of bull-headed shrikes were seen quite well. We returned to the River Hitotsuse where the tide was lower than yesterday however there was no sign of any spoonbills – perhaps the numerous fishermen were one reason. In addition to the usual wildfowl, there were a few species of waders – Eurasian curlew, dunlin, grey and Kentish plovers, sanderling. After driving on both banks of the estuary it was time to move on and stop for lunch before driving to Lake Mi-ike amidst spectacular mountain scenery with views of a couple of volcanoes. The lake had many wigeon, spot-billed duck and mallard, with smaller numbers of pintail, tufted duck, greater scaup and a pair of mandarin. A mixed flock of tits in the forest had long-tailed, varied and Eastern great or Japanese tit. A grey wagtail put in an appearance, but a woodpecker that was tapping at the top of a tree didn't oblige – it may have been white-backed. During our walk around the lake we also saw Daurian redstart, Japanese bush warbler and black-faced bunting. The afternoon light was fading so we made the short drive to a traditional Japanese onsen where we spent the night.

**Day 4: Tuesday 29 November****Lake Mi-ike, Kirishima shrine, Sendai river & reservoir, Takae farmland**

*Sunny all day, approximately 16 degrees maximum*

It was a crisp and clear start to the day with frost lining the roofs of the buildings near the hotel. We drove up the mountain and the first stop was at a viewpoint overlooking Lake Mi-ike and with the backdrop of a neighbouring volcano bathed in beautiful morning sunlight. In addition to being a good spot to take some scenic photos it also proved to be good for birds. A few Ryuku minivets flew around and one perched at the top of a tree to give everyone good views of this rare endemic. A few pale and brown-headed thrushes were feeding on berries near the viewpoint. We moved onto the grand shrine at Kirishima and mingled with the tourists. Several Oriental greenfinches were around the car park and as we walked through the woods a number of species were seen including brambling, coal tit, Eastern great tit, long-tailed tit, Eurasian nuthatch and Eastern buzzard.

We left the mountains for a two-hour drive interrupted by lunch. The Sendai river held a good number of ducks and in addition to the ones seen previously we had a few falcated ducks and Eurasian teal. A reservoir near the Sendai nuclear power station had quite a few mandarins, pochard and some of the regular species of ducks. A common kingfisher was the first for the trip and another Eastern buzzard soared alongside a black-eared kite. Driving down to the Takae farmland gave us our first Eurasian kestrel before we reached the arable fields that were our last stop of the day. As we drove around the fields it was obvious that there were plenty of birds around with good numbers of russet sparrows and Oriental greenfinches being easily seen. There were also plenty of buff-bellied pipits and Eurasian skylarks. The longer vegetation had meadow and black-faced buntings, with a male meadow bunting being particularly obliging by posing at the top of some reeds for several minutes. The rarest species we saw by Japanese standards was ruddy shelduck with five of these attractive ducks being seen well. Six lapwings plus common kingfisher, common sandpiper and dusky thrush added to the totals. It had been a very good day with excellent weather as we made our way to our hotel in Izumi.

**Day 5: Wednesday 30 November****Arasaki crane reserve & Kogawa reservoir**

*Sunny am, partly cloudy pm, approximately 17 degrees maximum*

A pre-breakfast visit to the world famous Arasaki crane reserve was first up for the day. It was the opportunity to see the cranes come out of the roost. The latest records indicated that there were approximately 12,000 hooded cranes and 500+ white-naped cranes here, along with nine common and three sandhill. We only saw the two more numerous species on this occasion but we would return later in the day. One black-faced spoonbill was found in the roost and a peregrine flew through being harassed by some rooks. A splendid pale-phase Daurian jackdaw was among a flock of rooks along with a few dark-phase.

We returned to the hotel for breakfast and then made our way to Kogawa reservoir. On the way we stopped on a bridge over a river to see brown dipper but no crested kingfisher. The reservoir had the usual ducks including plenty of mandarins and an osprey. A pleasant walk through the forest bordering the reservoir provided some good birds including red-flanked bluetail, Japanese pygmy woodpecker, red-billed leiothrix, wren and Asian stubtail.

After a fruitful morning it was time to return to Arasaki but not before stopping on another bridge over a river where we recorded our first Japanese wagtails. Lunch was at a restaurant overlooking the crane reserve and we had the luxury of watching the cranes while waiting for our food. The roof of the restaurant proved to be an excellent observation platform. We then drove along the fields to watch the feeding cranes and successfully find seven common cranes and three sandhill cranes. It was satisfying to find all four species of cranes that were currently at Arasaki. Small numbers of lapwings and common shelduck were seen before we reached an estuary. Our target was there, sleeping with its beak hidden, but it was clearly a black-faced spoonbill. Our final birdwatching of the day was to watch the cranes coming into roost and one black-faced spoonbill was among them but we didn't know if it was the same bird we had just seen or a different individual. Arasaki had lived up to expectations on another fine day.

**Day 6: Thursday 1 December****Arasaki, fly to Tokyo & drive to Kambayashi**

*Sun with occasional cloud, approximately 17 degrees maximum*

Our day began with a short drive alongside some of the crane fields where many hooded and white-naped cranes were already feeding. Fortunately the three sandhill cranes were feeding close to the road and, once again, we had excellent views of this least numerous of the four crane species we encountered at Arasaki. Our destination was a riverbank that had some good areas of reed on its banks. Buntings were in evidence feeding on the seeds and some occasionally showed themselves well enough for identification. Meadow, black-faced and common reed bunting were seen but we didn't have enough time for an extensive search. A few dusky thrushes showed well as did Daurian redstart and common sandpiper. A ring-tail hen harrier gave close flight views as did a couple of ospreys. We were fortunate to find a group of Chinese penduline tits and they obligingly showed reasonably well in the reeds.

Unfortunately we had to leave this good area because we had a two hour drive to the airport. Following check-in, we had lunch in an airport restaurant before boarding the flight to Tokyo. Our new driver was waiting and we boarded the minibus for a four-hour drive to Kambayashi Onsen. The highlight of the drive was a brief view of the snow-covered Mount Fuji. We checked into a modern onsen hotel and had another excellent Japanese dinner – our best so far. This hotel was an experience rather than a night in a hotel – an absolutely wonderful place to stay.

**Day 7: Friday 2 December****Jigokudani Yaen-Koen, Karuizawa**

*Sun all day, approximately 8 degrees maximum*

We checked out of our excellent hotel and walked to the Snow Monkey Sanctuary. On the way through the woodland we came across two mixed flocks of birds. Species seen were willow, coal, varied and Eastern great tit, plus nuthatch, Japanese pygmy woodpecker and Oriental greenfinch. The river had brown dipper and the sky had Eastern buzzard. Our early start meant that there were not too many tourists at the Japanese macaque bathing area. These endearing creatures (the macaques, not the tourists) kept us entertained for some time and many photos were taken. There are approximately 160 monkeys in the troop and we must have seen a good percentage of them during our time there. The air was more humid here because of the river and thermal springs, so the colder temperatures were quite noticeable. We had a pleasant lunch at a local onsen before driving to Karuizawa.

It was mid-afternoon when we arrived so we decided to drive to a hotel with a bird feeding station for a coffee and to see what birds were there – it was a good decision. We enjoyed fine views of willow, varied and Eastern great tit. However, the star of the show was a confiding Japanese accentor. This endemic species descends from higher altitudes for the winter and it was a privilege to have such fine views. We then tried to make good use of the remaining light by driving along a track in the hope of finding copper pheasant. Unfortunately we didn't find that particular endemic, however we did see a female wild boar with three young so there was some reward.

**Day 8: Saturday 3 December****Ura-Myogi & Oneyama Forest Park**

*Sunny all day, approximately 13 degrees maximum*

The grounds of the hotel were clearly good for birds with some interesting species seen before, during and after breakfast. The highlight was a pair of Japanese green woodpeckers that showed very well on trees just 15 metres away from the dining room windows. The woodpeckers were accompanied by a group of jays that are a different race to the ones in Britain. Other birds seen around the hotel were Japanese pygmy woodpecker, coal, varied and Eastern great tits, brambling and three hawfinches.

After leaving the hotel we had a one-hour drive to Mount Myogi. On the way up the mountain we stopped to watch a confiding pair of Chinese hwamei that were searching through the leaf litter close to the road. We parked at the end of the road and had a walk around. In addition to some of the common birds seen around the hotel we had long-tailed tit, pale and dusky thrush. A red-flanked bluetail showed well, however some bullfinch that we could hear refused to put in an appearance. Brown dipper was on the river and Japanese wagtail was on the dry part of a reservoir. The highlight of the morning was a female mountain hawk eagle which we would never have found without a group of photographers who had their cameras focussed on one sitting in a pine tree some distance away. Eventually the eagle gave flight views with a couple of sorties over the forest.

Another fine lunch preceded a short drive to Oneyama Forest Park. Unfortunately there were not many birds around and a couple of tapping woodpeckers failed to show themselves. However, Carolyn did see a great spotted woodpecker while waiting for the rest of the group. The fine clear skies revealed the crescent moon and Venus as we headed back to the hotel for a splendid dinner.

**Day 9: Sunday 4 December****Kose forest path, Karuizawa Wild Bird Park, Shotsubo Onsen hotel & Saku – River Chikuma & reservoir**

*Sunny intervals, approximately 10 degrees maximum*

A pre-breakfast stroll around the hotel brought good views of hawfinch and the local race of wren. A few jays, brambling and Oriental greenfinch were also seen. After breakfast we drove the short distance to a track running alongside a river. The usual tit species with the ubiquitous pygmy woodpeckers were seen a few times, but no pheasant. Great spotted woodpecker, black-eared kite and Japanese squirrel were also seen during the walk. A stroll up to the hotel with the feeding station was worth it for good views of Japanese accentor and squirrel. A siskin put in a very brief visit but was missed by most of the group. After

lunch it was a 45 minute drive to a reservoir that had a good selection of wildfowl. In addition to the regular species seen elsewhere, smew, goosander, gadwall and black-necked grebe showed well. The neighbouring river gave us good views of long-billed plover and Japanese wagtail. Good numbers of dusky thrush and tree sparrow were also around.

#### **Day 10: Monday 5 December**

##### **Karuizawa to Tokyo & Kushiro to Yorouchi**

*Sunny on Honshu, rain on Hokkaido, temperature unknown*

An early start was required for our drive to Haneda Airport. A stop at a service station for breakfast provided good views of a flock of long-tailed tits accompanied by Japanese pygmy woodpecker. The flight to Hokkaido left on time and the clear skies over Tokyo enabled us to get fine views of the city with Mount Fuji providing a spectacular backdrop. Unfortunately we had left the good weather behind and it was rain that greeted us at Kushiro.

The late afternoon drive in the gathering gloom did provide brief views of sika deer and black-eared kite but the weather didn't give us the inclination to stop. The highlight was probably a flock of about 50 whooper swans that flew over our bus.

On arrival at our hotel we had a welcome drink of tea before our orientation talk. However, before this writer had finished drinking his tea two very welcome guests appeared. The endangered Blakiston's fish owl was why we were here and a female and male came down to feed on the fish in the pool just a few metres from the lounge window. Stunning views of this magnificent bird – even guests who are not birdwatchers could not fail to be impressed by the World's largest owl. Both birds took a couple of fish before flying off into the darkness. It was an absolutely wonderful end to our first day on Hokkaido.

#### **Day 11: Tuesday 6 December**

##### **Yorouchi, Lake Mashu & Lake Kussharo**

*Snowing for most of the day, approximately -1 degree maximum*

It was a wintry scene when people looked out of their bedroom windows this morning as snow was falling for the first time during our trip. The feeding station at the hotel provided some very good birdwatching before, during and after breakfast. The local races of nuthatch, long-tailed tit and jay were possibly the star birds. However, the races of marsh and willow tit, plus great-spotted woodpecker are also worthy of consideration. Japanese pygmy woodpecker, brown dipper and wren completed the line-up.

The drive through the falling snow gave the impression that conditions were getting worse and the visibility was poor by the time we reached Lake Mashu. This volcanic lake is one of the clearest in the world and is in a very picturesque setting in the mountains. However the visibility was less than 200 metres so the setting was lost in the mist. We were hoping to see a few raptors but the adverse weather prevented that. However, we did have the bonus of a dozen pine grosbeaks which are fairly uncommon in Japan.

The continuous snow and visibility forced us to curtail our visit to Lake Mashu so we drove down to Lake Kussharo to see whooper swans and have a traditional venison meal at an Ainu restaurant and museum that's next to the lake. It was a fine meal but the weather wasn't improving. A stop at another part of the lake gave us more whooper swans and the chance to buy a few souvenirs. A white-tailed eagle provided some entertainment before we left and caught a fish while we were there.

The group decided that the weather wasn't conducive to more birdwatching and a hot onsen back at the hotel was far more appealing. Fortunately the snow didn't prevent the pair of Blakiston's fish owls from appearing and the snow covered landscape provided an even better setting for the photos. Another excellent dinner completed the day, this one was composed of 12 courses.

**Day 12: Wednesday 7 December****Yoroushi, Notsuke Peninsula & Shunkunitai**

*Mostly sunny, -2 degrees maximum approximately*

The snow had stopped and it was a fine, crisp and sunny morning. There were fewer birds around the feeding station and no new species were added. However, as we were loading luggage onto the bus some waxwings flew over, their distinctive calls were the only sign as the delay in dropping luggage took them out of sight. Most people were on the bus when a flock of approximately 20 redpolls flew into a tree behind the hotel, but they flew before anyone else could see them.

We then drove to the Notsuke Peninsula for some coastal birding where black scoter, red-throated diver, glaucous and slaty-backed gulls were the first notable species. A couple of white-tailed eagle provided the appetiser for several Steller's sea eagles, some of which showed very well and posed for several minutes. The visitor centre half way along the peninsula had a fine male sika deer showing well and, as we were about to leave, a rosy finch flew onto the roof before flying down just three metres onto the ground in front of us – amazing views. Driving to the end of the peninsula gave us a good view of a red fox, while there were quite a few whooper swans and brent geese on the sea. Further scanning on the ocean side had some close red-necked and slavonian grebes. Black-throated and Pacific divers were among the scoters.

A stop at a convenience store for lunch was opposite a harbour that held good numbers of shoveler and pintail, plus a few goldeneye. A rough-legged buzzard flew in an open woodland next to the road and perched in a tree. Unfortunately the reversing alarm of the bus flushed the buzzard before everyone could get a decent view.

Driving along the coast brought us to the visitor centre overlooking Lake Furen. Scanning out towards the lake from the centre provided two red-crowned cranes that were a taster for Friday. A flock of twenty plus snow buntings could be seen flying around the spit of land known as Shunkunitai so we decided to drive down to try to get a closer view and this turned out to be a sensible decision. As we walked up the spit that separates the lake from the sea, two birds flew up which were definitely not snow buntings. A further search for the two birds enabled us to identify them as shore larks. The larks conveniently gave satisfying scope views and as this species was a lifer for our local guide the walk had already been productive. The snow buntings were distant and the light was fading so we had gone as far as we wanted. Fortunately four waders flew past and landed on the edge of the lake. The waders were red-necked stints, which are an unusual bird for December on Hokkaido. As we walked back to the bus a short-eared owl flew within twenty of metres as it searched the rough grassland. A quick look at the closest duck on the lake enabled it to be identified as a female greater scaup. Six new species had been found within one hour here, which was excellent for late afternoon. It had been an incredibly interesting day of birdwatching which helped to make up for some of the frustrations caused by the poor weather of the previous day.

**Day 13: Thursday 8 December****Ochiichi harbour, nature cruise close to Yurui & Moyurui islands, Shunkunitai**

*Sunny all day, approximately -2 degrees maximum*

It was a beautiful clear, sunny start to the day with little wind, so it was perfect for our boat trip from Ochiichi. A good range of species was seen including four species of guillemot – Brunnich's, pigeon, spectacled and common. Other birds included rhinoceros auklet, ancient murrelet, pacific diver, red-necked grebe, long-tailed duck, harlequin and greater scaup. An interesting mix of gulls included glaucous-winged, glaucous, vega, slaty-backed, common and possibly Heuglin's. Steller's sea eagle and white-tailed eagle were also seen before, during and after the boat trip. Two harbour seals were a welcome addition, but a sea otter that came reasonably close to the boat was even more special. The otter was in an area where local fishing boats were moored as fishermen searched for sea urchins.

After a fine lunch at a restaurant overlooking Lake Furen, we went back to Shunkunitai for a brief walk. The two shore larks were soon relocated, but this time we had over eighty snow buntings which at times gave

spectacular aerial displays. Two red-crowned cranes were much closer this time and the afternoon light caught their beauty well. A total of seven red-necked stints and twenty-five dunlins gave good views. There were quite a few sika deer in the reedbeds and in roadside meadows. It had been another excellent day full of highlights as we made the drive to Tsurui.

#### **Day 14: Friday 9 December**

##### **Otowa Bridge, Tsurumi-Dai, Tsurui-Ito, Akan international crane centre**

*Heavy snow during the morning and early afternoon, dry and cloudy later, temperature unknown*

The day began with a pre-breakfast visit to the Otowa Bridge to observe over 80 red-crowned cranes roosting in the thermal waters of the River Setsuri. It was cold, but the sight of cranes flying over our heads as they left the roost was more than adequate compensation. Only six juveniles were seen among the group, which was a rather worrying sign for this beautiful endangered species and the national bird of Japan. A pair of Japanese wagtails, goosander, little grebe, a great-spotted woodpecker and large-billed crows were other species seen before we made our way back to the hotel for breakfast.

It was snowing as we left the hotel and drove the short distance to Tsurumi-Dai to see more cranes. One hundred cranes were waiting for a feed of corn, and close views of them in the falling snow made for an interesting ambience. Lunch was taken at a restaurant near Akan crane centre and we then moved to the reserve for the two o'clock feed of fish. Around 160 cranes and a few black-eared kites provided more entertainment, as did a few marsh tits near the visitor centre. We had seen over 300 red-crowned cranes during the day which was a significant percentage of the 1.350 which were estimated to be in Japan during the winter and it had been a privilege to see these magnificent birds. Fortunately the snow was easing and it had stopped by the time we arrived in Kushiro. The plane to Tokyo departed later than scheduled, but we were relieved that the airport had managed to clear the runways.

#### **Day 15: Saturday 10 December**

##### **Arrive UK**

The BA flight arrived at Heathrow ahead of the scheduled time to bring an excellent trip to Japan to an end. We had some fine memories of the wildlife, hotels, food, culture and landscape of Japan. A wonderful trip.





*White-naped cranes, Kyushu. © Barrie Cooper*



*White-naped and hooded cranes, Kyushu. © Barrie Cooper*



*Daurian redstart, Kyushu. © Barrie Cooper*



*Brown-headed thrush, Kyushu. © Barrie Cooper*





*Bull-headed shrike, Kyushu. © Barrie Cooper*



*Eastern buzzard, Kyushu. © Barrie Cooper*



*Japanese accentor, Honshu. © Barrie Cooper*



*Long-billed plover, Honshu. © Barrie Cooper*





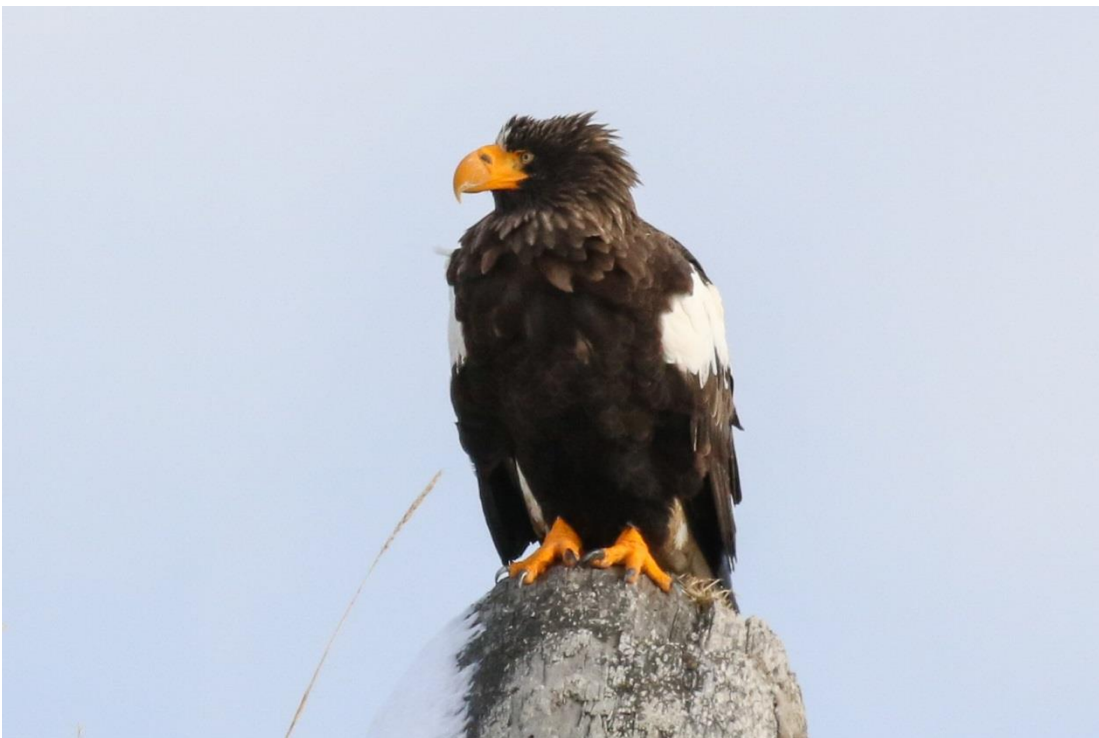
*Japanese macaques (snow monkeys), Honshu. © Barrie Cooper*



*Japanese macaques (Snow monkeys), Honshu. © Barrie Cooper*



*Pigeon guillemot, Hokkaido. © Barrie Cooper*



*Steller's sea-eagle, Hokkaido. © Barrie Cooper*





Blakiston's fish owl. Hokkaido. © Barrie Cooper



Eurasian jay of the Brandtii race, Hokkaido. © Barrie Cooper





*Japanese pygmy woodpecker, Hokkaido. © Barrie Cooper*



*Red-crowned cranes, Hokkaido. © Barrie Cooper*





Red-crowned cranes – adult and juvenile, Hokkaido. © Barrie Cooper