Japan: Winter Wildlife Spectacular Tour Report 2020

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by Mike Watson

Wild Images's sixth winter visit to Japan, as usual, featured some of its most iconic wildlife spectacles. Iconic is generally an overused word these days but our encounters with Japan's wildlife were again definitely worthy of the term. The main tour featured the famous Snow Monkeys of Nagano, in the Japanese Alps, combined with the winter wonderland that is Hokkaido, where the 'big three' of Red-crowned Crane, Blakiston's Fish Owl and Steller's Sea Eagle could hardly have been more photogenic. I took more photos on this tour (partly owing to the chances for action and motion blurs) than I have ever taken on a tour before. Such are the opportunities on my new favourite itinerary, it is certainly the most enjoyable photo tour I have done so far and I've done quite a few!

The pre-tour extension to the southern island of Hokkaido got us off to a great start with five different species at the crane fest of Arasaki, another of the wildlife wonders of the world. We had such a good time this year for several reasons. First of all, after months of unusually mild conditions, the weather changed in our favour at the precise moment we needed it to in almost every location. For instance, the Nagano region in Honshu had not seen any snow in January for the first time in 90 years but as soon as we arrived snowflakes appeared in the air and by the morning of our second day there blizzard conditions ensued, perfect for some interesting images of the Snow Monkeys.

The Red-crowned Cranes in the Kushiro area of Hokkaido are becoming slightly less predictable owing to a reduction in the amount of winter feeding but thanks to a sudden cold snap, we were able to enjoy some quality time with them both at their classic dawn spot at Otawa Bridge as well as at the feeding stations at Tsurui Ito and Akan. Ural Owls were at home when we called at a couple of their classic picturesque day roost sites and the hulking Blakiston's Fish Owls afforded a total of six sightings on our two nights vigil. The Whooper Swans of Lake Kussharo were in residence by its steamy hot springs but were rather upstaged by icicle-hovering Long-tailed Tits as well as a rather smart duck there. As if by magic, the drift ice that develops in Russia's Sea of Okhotsk finally reached the Shiretoko Peninsula of northern Hokkaido on the very morning of our first eagle boat trip there and scenes were absolute! The Notsuke Peninsula also offered blizzard conditions, in which to photograph its Sika Deer as well as some (just about) tame Red Foxes. Finally, the 'eagle fight club' at Lake Furen took place in yet another blizzard, adding something to our interpretation of it this time.

Although our present itinerary is intended to be a wildlife photography tour, it is also an opportunity to immerse yourself in other wonders of one of the world's most (if not *the* most!) fascinating countries. Its cultural delights are hard to ignore, in Kyushu we stayed in a very traditional minshuku (guest house) at Arasaki, the home of the late Sueharo Matano, who began feeding the cranes here in 1959. The minshuku is still run by his widow and daughters. Thousands of cranes were available from the breakfast table each morning as well as panoramic views from our rooms. This lovely and interesting experience was enhanced by the simply amazing Japanese food. Although I am not usually a lover of seafood at home, I certainly switched on to it here. I couldn't find a single dish I didn't like on the whole tour in fact. The care and attention to detail as well as the simply jaw dropping variety of every meal made each one a work of art that was difficult to resist spoiling by eating it. There is also the added benefit that it is much healthier, seafood-based and low-fat diet than I am used to at home. Bathing arrangements also include some very different and thoroughly relaxing options to the hustle and bustle of home in the UK. Minshuku Tsurumi-tei at Arasaki has an ofura, a large hot bath maintained at 41 degrees Celsius, in which you can almost swim, more of such things later.

Our travels included various modes of transport, from Haneda airport's shiny monorail and its incredible profusion of signage to Tokyo railway station, home to the Shinkansen (= *new trunk line*) better known to westerners as bullet trains. Our ride on a bullet train to Nagano and back was another tour highlight. We made four internal flights including the pre-tour extension and these all operated on time. In fact, Japan is a country in which everything happens on time. See, it can be done, it is simply a different state of mind, in which being late is not blithely accepted as it is elsewhere. Road travel was another pleasure. Our large Hyundai Hi-ace Grand Cabin vans are not available in the west, more's the pity. They are '*tardis-like*' in their inner space and are fitted with the heaviest duty winter tyres I have seen on a minivan such that they can easily cope with the icy roads of Hokkaido at normal speeds, that would see you in the roadside

ditch if you drove in the same manner at home. There was another factor that helped us this year. Tourists from China were present in a fraction of their usual numbers owing to the coronavirus health scare, so sites like the Snow Monkeys and Red-crowned Cranes were much easier going as a result.

Our pre-tour extension began in Tokyo's Haneda Ariport, with a flight to Kagoshima, a small city on the southerly island of Kyushu. Spring had come early to south Japan and on a hazy sunny morning we made our way across the spine of the Kyushu to the small town of Izumi and then, after a short stop to grab food for a picnic lunch at the first of many 7&I convenience stores, we entered the paddyfields of Arasaki. Here we were met with the spectacle of the first of thousands of cranes, including two very special species, the diminutive (by crane standards) Hooded and the stately and much taller White-naped, a truly elegant bird! Our first port of call was the delightful Minshuku Tsurumi-tei, located adjacent to the public crane observatory, where we would spend the next two nights, mostly listening to the bugling calls of the cranes that continued well after dark. Our 'man-in-Japan', Otani San explained how the footwear protocol works, basically what you wear on outside surfaces needs to be replaced by slippers of some sort when you see a raised floor. The exception being that not even slippers are worn on the lovely tatami matting floor of the bedroom. There were also still hordes of Eastern Rooks present around Arasaki, these winter visitors from across the East China Sea adorned almost every roadside wire. The boards at the crane visitor center reported 14,967 Hooded, 546 White-naped, 2 Common, 7 Sandhill, a single vagrant Demoiselle Crane plus 6 Common X Hooded Crane hybrids, however, with the mild spring weather, around 1,500 White-naped Cranes had already left. This was still a far cry from the days after WWII when only a few hundred cranes spent the winter here though. Subsequent feeding by villagers, often so poor they could barely feed themselves, helped numbers rise to thousands. Arasaki is one of world birding's true meccas, everyone makes the pilgrimage here eventually. The cranes are fed in a large netted off area behind the center and recently folks have been kept at a little further distance from the cranes owing to fears of bird flu. This is hardly surprising considering more than 130%(!) of the world population of the threatened Hooded Crane (according to Wikipedia!) and almost half of the world's White-naped Cranes are to be found wintering here, so many eggs in the same basket.

Photo opportunities for the cranes came is several forms. First of all, portraits of the common species were available at eye level in roadside fields, sometimes with an interesting fallow paddy field background, although it was a challenge at times to do something different and the paddy field banks have a nasty habit of running through the cranes' necks. Feeding time offered another opportunity, although the gathering was more often rather a mess and viewing for the best angle for White-naped Cranes towering over the Hoodeds was rather limited. Flight shots of birds leaving the feeding area for the surrounding fields were possible from by the observation tower each morning and we also tried the dawn flights to and from the separate feeding area on the east fields across the main channel from Arasaki. However, overly cloudy weather ruined our chances of sunsets on both evenings and sunrise flight photos were quite limited with only tiny patches of sky illuminated each morning that we had to line the birds up with and by the time this was happening a wall of '*toggers*' had built up along the road, causing the birds to miss the patch of sky we were hoping for. Common Crane usually remained a little out of reach of our lenses, as did the lonely Demoiselle Crane but a family group of five Sandhill Cranes was to be found every day right by the roadside on the east fields. Some of us even managed some action shots of their occasional fracas with neighbouring Hooded Cranes. Other stars of Arasaki included a stupidly tame Black-faced Spoonbill backlit one evening on the east fields, Green Sandpiper, Japanese Grosbeak, Daurian Redstart and an adult Daurian Jackdaw among the many hundreds of rooks.

Once the morning sunlight had become a bit too harsh on our final day in Kyushu, we went indoors, to a couple of beautifully restored samurai houses in nearby Izumi. Cherry blossom buds just starting to open in their gardens in the early southern spring, which was around one month ahead of schedule this year. Izumi was once home to a large garrison of samurai, who guarded the border with the neighbouring Higo domain. Taking over 30 years, the houses were painstakingly restored to their former glory, complete with indoor archery range and outdoor rock basin for cleaning the blood off swords! Luckily for us, the actor Tom Cruise was also visiting today and was happy to pose for photos in some armour á la *'The Last Samurai'.*

The main tour started back in Tokyo, where most of us had our first experience of Japanese public transport. Traversing the rail network in order to get to the Snow Monkeys saves a lot of time, once you have survived the complexity of buying tickets, humping and lumping all your kit up and down various escalators and then working out which queue to stand in at the platform – they are all clearly marked so there is not a scrum getting on and off trains. Some of the Tokyo metro even has automatic gates on the platform itself so the trains and speed in and stop more quickly, before the gates open, which are perfectly in line with the train's doors! Oh, and then there is also a

unique electro music jingle for every station! We were fortunate to see several Shinkansens coming and going before ours, including a pink one! Like missing a fly-by rare bird, I was disappointed not to get a photo of it. Travelling by bullet train was another quintessentially Japanese experience, boarding was very efficient, as to be expected and before long we were whizzing through the Tokyo suburbs at around 260kmph. Part of the world's largest metropolitan area and home to around 38 million people, it is also one of the most densely populated. Apartment blocks stretch as far as the eye can see, within touching distance of one another but all looking modern, new, clean and well maintained. I have never seen anywhere like Tokyo. In under two hours we were far away from the city and in the heart of the Japanese Alps. Alighting at Nagano, proud host city of the 1998 Winter Olympics, we then made the short drive to the spa/ski resort town of Yudanaka, our base for the next three nights. We arrived in good time to spend the afternoon at the Snow Monkey Park. It is easy to forget that this is not actually a safari park and the Japanese Macaques (AKA Snow Monkeys) are of wild origin and are free to roam as they wish. However, with their free open-air hot bath, why would they want to stray? The monkey park entrance is around 20 minutes walk along a snowy contour trail from the nearest car park, involving a total of 81 steps, 31 at the start and another 50 near the monkey park entrance itself. Our first afternoon in the vicinity of the monkeys' onsen produced some nice portraits, with a few flakes of snow in the air from 2pm onwards and some action shots of the monkeys walking along the rim of their hot tub but it was on our second day that things really got interesting.

For the first time in 90 years there had not been any snowfall in this region during the month of January, so imagine our delight when it started to chuck it down within hours of our arrival. With snowflakes falling steadily on my head while I was up to my neck in the 40 degrees warm water, the outdoor onsen at our hotel was very nice. Just like what would be happening to the monkeys the following day. No wonder they like it so much. We had lots of great possibilities in the snow. For a start those who wanted photos of monkeys in the pool itself had plenty of opportunities but in the extreme cold there was a lot of steam too. There was a lot of activity around the pool as animals visited it in sometimes horizontally blasting snow. I tried for something different to the stereotypic monkey-in-a-bath photo, with a combination of fast and slow shutter speeds, either freezing or blurring the snowflakes into streaks across the image, with some great expressions on the monkeys faces. The snow also offered blurred foregrounds with which to partly obscure the monkeys as seems to be the fashion of the moment. The monkeys were so habituated they would walk right through a crowd of tourists and even hop over my camera when I stuck the lens in their way for an extreme close-up, wide angle view. We spent all day at the monkey park, with a break for a much-appreciated simple and very tasty hot lunch of *Sansai Saba* (= Mountain Vegetable Noodle Soup) followed by *Chimaki* (triangular rice cakes, wrapped in moist bamboo leaves) at the nearby onsen. The onsen itself here is sometimes shared by both human and monkey bathers! The snow continued to fall on and off all day and the monkey action kept some of us occupied right until closing time when the light turned blue again as evening shadows crept up the sides of the narrow valley in which the park is located. It was also a pleasure to meet 'Mr Birding Japan' himself, Mark Brazil, here. *'Where do you usually see serow?'...'Oh there's one right now'.* How's that for skill? Happily, it stayed long enough, lumbering up the snow-covered slope opposite the visitor center, for all to catch up with this weird-looking goat-like creature. Otherwise the cold, snowy forests were very quiet, and I only managed a single species of bird all day, a flock of Eurasian Nuthatches.

Our second full day at the monkey park was bright and sunny and much of the snow that fell the previous day melted. The monkey activity was different too, many of them spent the majority of the day on the sunny slope opposite the visitor center, only descending briefly at feeding time and again towards the end of the day, when they mostly gathered on the opposite bank of the stream. Some activity continued at the monkey onsen all day though. We added both Sika Deer and Wild Boar to our mammal list, both apparently very infrequent visitors here at this time of year! Sunlit portraits were available today as well as action shots of groups of baby monkeys playing together across the river as well as a disturbing incident when one apparently psycho female tried to injure several tiny babies, biting them viciously before being fought off by their guardian mums. We very much enjoyed our stay in the mountains, enjoying some great 'photo-opps' with the monkeys and some really wonderful food. The hotel even broke out their very stylish US$15 Japanese chopsticks on occasion, so fine you could pick up individual grains of rice with them... and did I mention the onsen? This one was voted the best of the tour, although it was a shame not to save the best 'til last. At first it feels a bit weird to bath naked in the same pool as strangers but the relaxing experience of the geothermally heated, mineral-laden water made it worthwhile. I also figured out that to avoid the jibber jabber of the noisy ski-ers that shared our hotel, a late visit to the onsen after our evening meal was usually much quieter (although it is customary to go to there before your meal).

We retraced our steps back to Nagano and caught the shinkansen back to Tokyo, where we took a flight to Kushiro on the snowy northern island of Hokkaido, home to some of Japan's most spectacular wildlife. As I walked out of the hotel next morning to clear the ice

off the minivan's windscreen, the hairs in my nose froze and when we rolled up at the classic crane overnight roosting site of Otawa Bridge, the temperature gauge read minus 19 degrees Celsius. Hokkaido is very different to the rest of Japan. It came as a surprise to me that the cranes are not guaranteed at the bridge every day. There had been none here the previous day, when they had been disturbed by some over eager '*toggers*'. However, they were closer in the river than usual, affording a nice landscape composition as the light turned from blue to golden with the sunrise. Beyond the cranes our first Steller's Sea Eagle was feeding on something dead on a bank in the course of the river and an (introduced) American Mink swam by just upstream of the bridge. Within a couple of hours, the sunlight was far too bright, and we headed back for breakfast, relieved to be able to defrost our freezing extremities in the process.

After breakfast our next stop was the famous Akan Crane Observation Center. We were rather stunned to find that only doves and crows had turned up this morning at feeding time. They do not feed the cranes with fish here anymore, owing to fears of bird flu, so there are no longer any of the photogenic eagle/crane/fox conflicts of the past and in fact the cranes are not even guaranteed either. There is a move towards putting out less grain as well, in line with the authorities' feeling that there is generally too much feeding of wildlife going on. We hung around, until lunchtime without any luck, kept going by the most amazing hot chocolate of the tour and then retreated across the road to a great little restaurant. We were in sight of the crane center and could soon see a handful of cranes arriving at last, while we ate lunch. Disappointingly, as soon as we returned all but one flew off! At least this *'Billy-No-Mates'* sat down for us, affording some interesting images partly obscured by wind-blown snow. There weren't any of the other zillions of ' *toggers'* around that we had seen at Otawa Bridge this morning, so we knew the action must be happening elsewhere. Indeed, it was and as we arrived at the Tsurui Ito Crane Observation Center in the afternoon a group of over 60 stately Red-crowned Cranes was gathered, overlooked by a larger gathering of photographers. Many cranes were still pecking in the snow, where the grain of the morning feeding session had been scattered. There was some coming and going that sparked a little dancing but mostly we struggled to isolate birds for portraits or to make some sense of the random and usually messy patterns of black-and-white birds against the white snow background. In late afternoon the cranes would walk up a low rise, taxi-ing towards their take-off runway from where most of them took flight back towards the river where they spend the night. We swung by Otawa Bridge on our return to Kushiro to find a few cranes had already arrived at their roost, although now in less than optimal light. A Steller's Sea Eagle flew along a distant forested ridge in the sunset and it was soon time for us to call it a day too. The onsen this evening was rather swimming pool-like indoors and not very atmospheric, but the water was nice and the warmth of the outside, rock-lined, pool in bitingly cold night air was terrific.

Next morning, we made a beeline for Tsurui Ito where there was again plenty of crane activity to keep us occupied. We followed this with a very photogenic Ural Owl day roost site in a huge hole in the trunk of an ancient oak tree, about 35m from a fenced off viewing position not far from the main road. This is a regular spot for the big owl with a *'deceptively gentle face'* and in fact there are often two of them side-by-side in the same hole. We could watch it for as long as we wanted, or at least until we got some owl images with less squinty eyes. We returned to Tsurui Ito for the late afternoon crane show, which was rather cloudy now, before heading back to Kushiro for the night.

Oh dear! A stunning hoar frost meant we should have been at Otawa Bridge this morning but I was relieved to hear that a later start had still been the best plan when I learned that again the cranes had been disturbed by ' *toggers'* at their roost and none were present at dawn. For the second time in five days, this is obviously becoming a serious problem. Instead we returned to Akan, where this time the cranes had come for breakfast. We suspect that the very cold morning two days earlier had caused them to stay longer in the warm waters of their roosting river. Their numbers built from 10 at 08.30am to 67 by 10am and we enjoyed lots of flight shot potential and some dancing too.

In the late morning we set off towards Lake Kussharo, situated in the 900 km sq Akan Mashu National Park, detouring via another very picturesque Ural Owl roosting in tree, this time even closer than the previous day's bird. It woke up a little when a tiny shrew ran across the snowy floor of its woodland home. Some Marsh Tits were drinking from melting icicles on a roadside tree. Our first stop at Lake Kussharo was Kotan Onsen, where the outflow from an outdoor pool keeps a tiny patch of water on the lakeshore ice-free. The reason for our visit was the Whooper Swans from Siberia that spend the winter here. However, I found them less than inspiring in rather steamy conditions and they were totally upstaged by the gorgeous Northern Long-tailed Tits drinking from the melting icicles on a large tree next to the car parking area here. There was also a stunning drake Falcated Duck among the small flock of Mallards to distract us from the swans although it was against the light the whole time this afternoon. We stopped further along the lakeshore at nearby Sunayu on our way to our accommodation at Kawayu Onsen, where more stupidly tame swans were to be found in the narrow strip of ice-free water, although now in blue light.

We returned to Sunayu before breakfast next morning for some more blue swan photos and after checking out of our very nice hotel we headed back to Kotan Onsen for the rest of the morning. Here the Long-tailed Tits and the drake Falcated Duck (now in stunning morning sunlight on a tiny pool in the ice) continued to upstage the swans. We had lunch back at Sunayu, where a few of us went in search of woodland birds, finding Grey-headed and Great Spotted Woodpeckers as well as Eurasian Nuthatches and a flock of Dusky Thrushes, all just about photographable but more of a birding experience. The noodle soup at lunch was very good though as were the lovely views of the lake from the restaurant's panoramic windows. Leaving the Sunayu area we paused at the nearby Mount Iozan Volcano viewpoint, located only 2km to the southeast of the spa town. This active volcano, situated in the giant Kussharo Caldera, is rather small and at only 512m asl it is even lower than Pendle Hill, but it makes up for lack of height with a very photogenic arrangement of sulphurous vents, many of which were coated in bright yellow deposits. I took a variety of photos, preferring a f/22 starburst sun wide angle view. The visitor center here was full of tourist tat but had some very nice melon and vanilla ice cream. Thanks for the tip Ricky! We pressed on to our next accommodation, the truly delightful Yoroushi Onsen in Nakashibetsu, set in a pretty little river valley with a rushing stream flowing past the elongated lodge building. Outside the lobby/restaurant area is a bird feeding station, visited by numerous tits (Great, Marsh, Willow and Long-tailed), Eurasian Nuthatches, both Great Spotted and Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers and Eurasian Jays. However, the thick glass of the huge windows results in a distinct lack of sharpness unless you photograph perpendicular to the panes. It was a lovely place to sit and watch the birds though. The rooms had by far the best views of all, with a pair of Brown Dippers feeding nearby and the food here was the runaway winner of the 'Best Food of the Tour' contest. While a fairly indulgent and unnecessarily luxurious stay, the main the reason we were here was for an appointment with the largest owl in the world, Blakiston's Fish Owl.

The owl obliged at 9.27pm, after our evening meal, with a visit to its fish-stocked pool, a kind of '*owl McDonalds'* but not before an American Mink had sneaked in and pinched one! Unfortunately, as well as a huge bright green Darvic ring on its left leg and a metal one on its right, the owl seemed to have an injured left eye. No wonder it had resorted to an easy life of stuffing itself with the endless supply of fish from the onsen. From some angles it was possible to lose both of these unsightly features. The owl was close, only around 4m away from the window on the banks of the tiny, floodlit pool and around 100mm seemed to be an ideal focal length. I decided to opt for a ISO1600/slow shutter speed portrait on a tripod with the 70-200mm lens. While its feathers were fluffed up and covered its leg irons, I was disappointed with its gammy eye and the background of wooden planks on the opposite side of the stream, which needed to be photo-shopped out later. The owl's fish pool was restocked at 6pm and 4.00am and next morning it was back for breakfast at 5.30am, just before it started to get light. Checking recent sightings on the calendar at reception it seems we were unlucky not have an early evening visit by the owl. The other stars of Yoroushi were the gorgeous Sable that have moved in under the decking of the restaurant area after being absent (well, having been removed!) in 2019. Like the owl, the Sables were very tricky to capture in a photogenic situation among all the man-made bits and pieces of the bird feeding area but there were a couple of spots where this was possible together with some photo-shopping of obvious straight lines. They are fast moving too! We saw at least three different animals, one with a darker face than the pair that live under the decking. Solitary Snipe and Crested Kingfisher are also seen occasionally from the hotel windows along the stream, but we had no luck with either. The snipe has apparently not been seen this winter. The hotel had two onsens and the outside pool in the second smaller one in the new block was particularly nice to have to myself next morning with a dipper singing on the stream.

After a very late check out following the owl night vigil we headed northeast for another owl appointment. We would not normally plan to have the owl nights back-to-back for obvious reasons but this year demand for accommodation was such that it was unavoidable. On the eastern shore of the Shiretoko Peninsula lies Rausu, another true mecca for world birders. Not only is it known as being *THE* historic main site for Blakiston's Fish Owl, it also hosts a winter gathering of around 300 eagles, mostly the awe-inspiring Steller's Sea Eagle. We checked in early to our accommodation at Rausu, the famous Washino-Yado Minshuku, which has become synonymous with the big fish owl, with a view to setting up tripods for the owl session. We should be done by 7pm and have a good night's sleep, right? No. Unfortunately the owls(!) did not show up until 3.30am next morning, probably owing to a frustratingly large number of noisy comings and goings by prospective owl watchers. The minshuku and adjacent restaurant are the usual places that folks shoot the owls from, but I took a chance from the old bus that is snowed into the stream bank and although a little further away, faces the owl pools. The bus was great until the heater packed in around 10pm. Again, flash is not allowed here but the light from the strobe lights that flash at around 1/90 sec was sufficient to opt for the recommended settings of 1/80 sec shutter speed, ISO 3200 and an aperture of f/5.6 with the 500. At 1/125 sec every other frame is black on the 1DX's high burst mode owing to the strobe effect so pushing up the ISO is the only realistic alternative if you want any kind of action shot. The owls usually fly off in the direction of the bus, but they leave the floodlit area very

quickly and I wasn't excited about the possibility of a flight shot. If only I could have chosen my company in the bus though. There was one chap who went out for a leak behind the bus twice and persisted in having long loud mobile phone conversations and then there was another person who actually went outside the bus to make a phone call too!!! Unbelievable, particularly bearing in mind that the owls usually fly in from the valley behind the bus. This combined with the early-evening-only visitors probably caused the owls to wait until things quietened down. At 7.34pm I wondered why some dipstick was rocking the bus back and forth but when I looked around for the culprit everyone appeared to be sat still and eventually the rocking movement stopped. I thought nothing more of it until someone asked at breakfast next morning if I had felt the earthquake!!! Flipping heck! It was a big one, at 7 on the Richter Scale. Luckily it was located deep off the coast of Hokkaido, centred at 44.7 degrees north, 148.9 degrees east with a depth of 160 km and did not present a tsunami risk. After Fukushima it seems there are tsunami warnings all along the coast of Hokkaido with risk areas and safe zones clearly marked out. Seeing all of this, I was quite happy to stay way upslope in Shiretoko National Park after our night at Washino-Yado, even if we are talking about a 200 years event!

Time ticked away and I took a break myself from 11.30pm to 3am, after which I knew there was usually another flurry of sightings. Sure enough, BAM! At just before 3.30am both owls showed up, the branch of the tree they sat on bent under their combined weight. They dropped down to the fish pool and took a fish each but then disaster struck. The mobile phone call/weak bladdered guy turns up and walks up to the minchuku, almost falls through the window and flushes them. I will be very happy not to meet him again. However, after another nervous wait one of the owls returned twice, at 4.50am and 5.20am. The views from the bus were a little different to the usual side on shot and happily everyone that wanted to, managed some images. As dawn approached the eagles started to leave their roosting sites in the valley, *washi* means eagle in Japanese and the lodge here is actually named after the eagles rather than the owls. Up to three Brown Dippers were now active by the fish owl pools in the stream and it was soon time for breakfast, our only western style of the tour but by now we all missed a super-healthy Japanese seafood-based breakfast.

The rest of the day was spent on the Notsuke Peninsula about 50km to the south of Rausu, where we enjoyed some good encounters with Sika Deer and Red Fox on a sunny morning. There were a few pixel birds that included Spectacled Guillemot, Stejneger's Scoter, Harlequin Duck and Pelagic Cormorant on the seaward side of the peninsula, but all were effectively out of reach of our cameras. After a great noodle soup lunch at the visitor centre at the end of the peninsula, we retraced out steps as the fog rolled in. Angiolo was messing around, moving the magnetic birds on the large map inside the center and happened to move a rosy finch to coastline just north of the center, much to the disgust of Mr Brazil, who was also here with another group! It was swiftly replaced, and I thought nothing more of it. We headed off again after lunch and while some petrified trees made worthwhile subjects in the gloom, we soon called it a day and headed back to Rausu with some full-on days ahead. Our evening meal was excellent again and the onsen not bad either. The inner one was 'swimming pool style' again but the outer one was nicely rock lined with snowflakes falling on my head. Otani San has heard the BFO here in the past too, the wooded valleys here look a nice area for it.

I'm going to need some bigger superlatives to describe the boat trips out of Rausu, which were probably made more exciting because we had resigned ourselves to missing the much-desired pack ice, which had not yet reached Rausu this winter. We had watched the tourist boats trying to make the best of things, throwing fish for the eagles just outside the harbour walls the day before and had thought we might be able to do something with flight shots in some interesting early morning light maybe if we were lucky. Well we needn't have worried. '*The ice is here*' said an excited Otani San first thing next morning. It had arrived overnight to the coast, a short distance north of Rausu and very much within our reach. A thin line of white on the skyline marked the front edge of the drift ice that forms every winter to the north of Hokkaido in Russia's Sea of Okhotsk, at 44 degrees, the most southerly drift ice in the northern hemisphere. This would be like having sea ice in the Bay of Biscay!!! As we approached the ice in our jet-boats we could see that the eagles were already waiting for us. Around 300 of them eventually gathered on the ice around the boats, which were expertly bumped into the ice and were soon surrounded by a wildlife photographer's dream of subjects. Again, like the cranes it could be tricky to isolate them and there was so much going on it was a challenge to decide what to do with such a bewildering array of possibilities that included flight and action shots, with or against the sunrise. Portraits either close-up or from a distance of singles or groups of Steller's Sea Eagles or White-tailed Eagles, separately or with both species side-by-side, showing the huge size difference (it is amazing to see the massive White-tailed Eagle dwarfed by Steller's)? Landscape format or portrait format? Don't forget the latter for uses other than a desktop monitor! Flight shots against the gorgeous forested hillside or snowy mountain backdrops? Motion blurred flight shots? The list goes on and from time to time I simply watched the action away from my viewfinder. The eagles can be very close, sometimes within the 5m minimum focussing distance of the 500 and I was cutting bits off all over the place too, wings and tails etc. However, it worked well to isolate birds and after

our four boat trips I preferred using it to the 70-200mm as nothing touches it for clarity at an ideal range, despite my arms aching a bit from shooting so much, something that I never felt before. However, a 200-600mm or 100-400mm zoom lens has got to be the way to go for an all allrounder in combination with a full frame sensor. As for the eagle sea ice spectacle itself, it is certainly one of the best things I have ever seen and although I hate making lists, it must be a new entry to my top five or ten, I suppose. If you haven't seen it yet, then shove it up the bucket list and make sure you do!

It was great to hook up with Birdquest colleague Dave Farrow, who was guiding a Sunrise Birding group with Gina Beebe Nicholl and Steve Bird. As we cruised along the coast towards the sea ice on our second outing… '*Is that a Thayer's Gull?*', it eventually got the nod from Otani San with his Japanese photo guide of hybrid gulls. One of my favourites too, it is a shame that it has been relegated to subspecific status of Iceland Gull but it was great to see a perfect adult, straight off the page of Klaus Malling Olsen's '*Gulls*'. It had travelled a long way to get to northern Japan from Arctic Canada. There were lots of other gulls here too. Mostly Slaty-backed but also a few Glaucous-winged and Glaucous in that order of abundance. Vega Gull is only to be found far to the south in Honshu in winter. On another boat trip a group of three Stejneger's Scoters flew past Rausu harbour mouth and on most others, there were usually a few Spectacled Guillemots on the sea as we travelled to and from the area of drift ice just to the north of Rausu.

We spent another afternoon down Notsuke Peninsula, looking in vain for the flock of Asian Rosy Finches, which Dave and the Sunrise Birding group had found… in exactly the same spot that Angiolo had randomly moved the rosy finch magnet on the visitor center map!!! What a coincidence! We were happy to catch up with this gorgeous bird later at point blank range in the snow elsewhere in Hokkaido. We did have some very nice encounters with the herds of Sika Deer, with the air full of snowflakes falling hard on them and the foxes showed up again. Feeding of foxes has been banned here now so the days of them waiting for you to pull up along the road down the peninsula are numbered. On another afternoon we ventured north along the coastline from Rausu, checking the little harbours, which were now mostly clogged with drift ice that stretched away to the Kuril Islands of Russia in the distance. Hundreds of Harlequin Ducks had gathered here but most were out of reach and we also had a couple of groups of sandy-coloured Steller's Sea Lions, swimming close to the ice edge, a three-star mammal on our birding trips that we hardly ever see.

We woke up next morning and it was snowing. Quite heavily in fact. There had been about 10cm overnight and it was still falling. We called in at Seicomart in Rausu and loaded up with breakfast items before heading south. There were folks clearing the snow off their drives and the stretches of road adjacent to them everywhere but there were hardly any vehicles out and about yet. In fact, the gas stations were mostly closed, as were the shops and restaurants all the way to Nemuro. Rolling up at a very snowy Lake Furen, the guys at Hotel Sunseto were preparing to put out fish for the eagles and kites that hang around here. This is a different opportunity to what you get at Rausu, a mass of eagles fighting over fish scraps on a snow-covered (today) frozen lake. It can produce some very interesting results but is more about getting down for a low perspective, blasting away on high burst and hoping for a nice distribution of eagles across the frame. At least the blizzard conditions made the images more artistic with snowflakes right across the subjects. Motion blurring both the snow and eagles can be interesting too. There were more White-tailed than Steller's here and both were outnumbered by Black-eared Kites, the most we had seen on the tour by far.

We picked our way through the snow for the rest of the day and ended up within striking distance of Kushiro Airport at the Akan Crane Center in the late afternoon, where there was a good gathering of Red-crowned Cranes. They were quite active too, with some dancing and interaction going on before they started to drift away to their roosting sites after 4pm. This was our cue to make our way to the airport and catch a flight back to the reality of a sea of face masks in Tokyo, where our tour ended.

Finally a big thank you to my co-leader, our 'man-in-Japan' for 20 years, Otani Chikara, who made our visit so much more enjoyable, explaining how everything worked and what all of these new things we encountered were, from the complicated, though entirely logical, indoor footwear protocol to etiquette at meals. That is not to say I did not test his endless patience. '*Mike, what ARE you doing*?' Well, dipping noodles in brown tea, eating curry with chopsticks and '*that is somebody's house*' were probably my worst errors! At least I did not come to evening meal wearing the *benjo* (= toilet) slippers as a couple of offenders did and I very much enjoyed new things like wearing the yukata to evening meal and checking every onsen (communal geothermal water bath) at the terrific accommodations we stayed at. We were almost all happy converts to this different style of living (not quite everyone wore the yukata or used the onsens, sometimes owing to time spent on other things like downloading thousands of photos). I cannot recommend a visit to Japan in winter more highly. It is simply one of the best (if not *the* best) destinations I have ever visited.