Japan: Winter Wildlife Spectacular Tour Report 2023

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It's still dark when we arrive at the spot by the river, winding through the silent forests of Hokkaido; landscapes frozen deep beneath heavy snow.

The Wild Images group is buoyant, despite the bone-cold temperatures. But I'm dreaming of hot coffee, of warmth in my toes. Yet, as the first rays of sun percolate through the tree branches, breaks in the mist reveal the forms of huge white birds, hunched in the distance below. They awaken, preen and point their bills skyward, their bonding, bugling calls echoing across the valley.

Then slowly they start to dance. And they bow, and encircle each other, and leap fully 5ft in the air – angel-shaped wings raised and legs dangling – before arching their backs; the pièce de rèsistance move in a dance that is already perfection.

And then I feel it. A full thwack in the solar plexus. And I'm suddenly worried that I might actually cry – deeply moved by the absolute beauty of the Red-crowned Crane; not only one of nature's rarest cranes but surely the most elegant of birds.

But then this year's Wild Images Japan winter tour, like those before it, had many moments that ranged from the enchanting to the occasionally surreal. From Nagano's famous 'snow monkeys' that bathe in hot springs, to the world's largest owl – the Blakiston's Fish Owl (its body alone bigger than a Labrador) – diving into snow holes, its uniqueness can give the tour an immensely enjoyable flavour. And not to mention other highlights, like the aerial acrobatics of two of the titans of the eagle world – the magnificent Steller's Sea eagle and the White-tailed – over the ice floes of the Sea of Okhotsk.

With our time in Hokkaido coinciding with what newspapers reported as a 'once-in-a-decade cold snap', and taking place only three months after Japan finally opened its doors to independent travellers (following the Covid 19 pandemic) there were, inevitably, a few challenges, mostly as the country's facilities began to re-emerge from a state of half-suspension. But these were far outweighed by the uncomplicated beauty of its wildlife; this tour provides particular opportunities for trying fine art approaches to wildlife photography and new techniques.

With the main tour, and its extension, covering three of the largest islands of Japan's sprawling archipelago, there was so much to see that many of us (me included) filled a record number of memory cards. And then there were many moments between wildlife sightings where elements of Japan's distinctive cultural identity could be enjoyed – from the traditional guest houses with deeply-relaxing hot onsens to bathe in, to the ten-course (?!) evening meals that felt like a showcase of the country's culinary specialities.

The Pre-Tour Extension: Kyushu's Carnival of Cranes

Our pre-tour extension began at Tokyo's Haneda Airport, with an early-morning flight to Kagoshima, a city on the southerly island of Kyushu. Our focus, for the next few days, was the world-famous wintering grounds of thousands of cranes at Arasaki, a farming area of flooded paddy fields on the fringes of the coastal city of Izumi.

Arasaki is a lifeline for the large numbers of cranes – mostly Hooded and the very-graceful White-naped – that steadily gather from breeding grounds in Russia and northeast China. These flocks swell in size as they migrate past the Korean Peninsula, before alighting in Arasaki – the reclaimed land west of the broad Iwashita River – for winter.

The cranes start arriving in early December, feeding and reinvigorating themselves before – on a seemingly indiscriminate bright day in February or March – bank off from the paddy fields to journey north back to their breeding sites.

Kyushu itself spreads out around the giant active volcano of Mount Aso, which forms one of the largest calderas in the world. Together with the island's proximity to the warm Kurishio ocean current, these features made it not only the warmest place on our tour (almost coat-off weather!) but also renowned for high numbers of endemic plant and dragonfly life. Together with most of Japan, but with the

exception of Hokkaido, Kyushu escaped the ravages of the last ice age, contributing to Japan's status as a (perhaps) surprising powerhouse of biodiversity.

For us, though, it was the spectacle of the cranes that drew us there, and together with our specialist Japanese co-guide Yuki, we began our first photography day by picking up the two vehicles for this first part of our tour. (Yuki driving the cavernous Hyundai Hi-ace Grand Cabin van that would be a mainstay vehicle, and me with different variations of the nifty Subaru that made light work of the ice-roads in Hokkaido and the later blizzard conditions.)

On the hour or so drive to Arasaki's paddy fields, we stopped for a picnic at one of the country's many 7-Eleven or Lawson's convenience stores that would become a frequent stop for the duration of our tour. These stores offer a cornucopia of lunch options – from fresh sushi to sandwiches and heated soups and noodle dishes, together with a huge selection of snack items. I started the tour by making the food choices of an errant five-year-old at a fairground. Thankfully – as the tour progressed – an appetite for chocolate Macadamia nuts gave way to vaguely more sensible options.

The story of the Izumi locals' relationship with the cranes is an emotive one. Back in the 1950s, only 300 visiting cranes arrived each year – a sharp population decline. The locals, many of them desperately poor themselves in the post-WWII years, set about feeding the birds corn, gradually enabling numbers to swell to the thousands.

More than 80% of the world's Hooded Cranes now winter here in Izumi, with recent estimates of around half of the world's remaining 5,000 White-naped – that have suffered from decades doing the same. Current annual estimates of the total wintering crane population at the Arasaki crane grounds vary between 10,000 and 15,000 – but stopping at the visitor centre of the public crane observatory, the notice board revealed good news and the sad.

On the positive side, the total crane numbers, which included Hooded, White-naped, Common, Sandhill, two Siberian, and a number of hybrids, still came to 10,074 – still buoyed by a reasonably large number of White-naped (compared to some years) of 2,377. But the number of Hooded was much lower than at any point in the last decade – at only 7,686. The local Izumi newspaper reported that 3,000 Hooded were now wintering at a new site in North Korea but also that – heartbreakingly – 1,600 more had been recently lost to Bird Flu.

As a result of these fears, the cranes are fed in large netted-off areas, making the best chances for good photography to either stand on the large flat balcony of the visitor centre, or drive along the network of tiny roads that weave through the paddy fields and outer canals for close-up portraits of family groups – or to catch flocks taking to the skies.

Due to the usual on-site guesthouse not accepting groups so soon after Covid, we drove out to our hotel in Izumi city, to freshen up before heading back to the paddy fields for a sunset that was muted at best. Nevertheless, many of us got some good shots of a flock of stately White-naped cranes – much taller than the Hooded at nearly 1.3m high and with pearl-grey droopy wing feathers, a red face and a white stripe running from the crown and down their necks.

But it was at dawn, the following morning, that the true spectacle of the Arasaki cranes revealed itself. After a slightly wobbly start of me deciding where to most-accurately position ourselves (the farmers apparently decide where exactly to throw corn on the eastern portion of the paddy fields on a whim each morning) we nailed it just as ribbons of cranes peeled into the skies amid a cacophony of trumpeting calls. To see any bird species – particularly one as graceful as these Hooded and White-naped cranes – en masse and flying in concert with each other, is nothing short of a wonder.

Even though we missed out on fiery sunsets and sunrises on both days, instead gifted dull cloud, we agreed that the two dawn mornings where thousands of cranes flew overhead, – sometimes so close that we'd struggle to frame more than two without cutting off a wing – were just stunning.

I'd learned that after a brief feed on the eastern paddy fields, the cranes head on to the fields just in front of the visitor centre, for a second breakfast but with a far longer course. My technique was to leave the eastern site before the last cranes had finished their first feed – speeding along the quiet agricultural roads with the cranes flying and bugling overhead, surrounding the vehicle as if racing it – to get onto the outdoor observation roof of the visitor centre just as vast flocks rotated and swooped from the sky in fluid movements not unlike a stadium wave at a football match.

And it was from the roof that, on both mornings, we were able to try a variety of shots, both slow-shutter speed 'panning' and as many different kinds of flight shots as we could think of.

It was undeniably impressive when successive flocks of Mallards, Crows, then Hooded and White-naped Cranes rose skywards only to then settle again, sometimes only metres away.

But the view from the roof is not without its challenges. The paddy fields themselves can reflect a lot of light and be untidy, while the sheer numbers of birds makes for crane chaos. Every time a great shot presents itself, it can be quickly ruined by a flock moving into a different focal plane. Yet a few hours of shooting this morning carnival makes for a genuinely invigorating experience. In amongst the flocks, we spotted a long Sandhill and a Common Crane, although our attempts to find a single Siberian Crane that had been reported just a few days earlier, sadly came to nothing.

One of the good things about Wild Images tours is that we fill as many hours of the day as possible with shooting wildlife – even if the midday light is stark, we still try to look for interesting behaviour or different species to photograph.

At Arasaki, we filled our time between morning and late the afternoon / sunset crane sessions by driving around the network of canals and paddy fields that made up the reserve. The White-naped Cranes were just beginning to dance and we were rewarded with some particularly good raptor sightings.

At the end of our second day we had notched up dozens of Black-eared Kites, Peregrine Falcon, Osprey and Kestrel – while smaller birds included (among others) Bull-headed Shrikes, Dusky Thrush, Oriental Turtle Dove, and a Japanese White-ear. Driving around the fields we also had sightings of Snipe, Great Egret, Black-faced Spoonbill and a variety of waterfowl and corvids.

The group members in my vehicle were lucky to see a solitary Japanese Raccoon Dog (believed, by some in Japan, to be imbued with magical powers) that stared briefly straight at us, before disappearing into the trees.

During one lunchtime break, we visited a row of beautifully restored Samurai houses, belonging to the aristocratic warriors who once guarded the gates of Izumi. And, after our crane session on our last morning, we stopped at a large hydroelectric dam – set deep in the forest and recommended as a bird-watching site – before starting our journey back to Kagoshima airport.

The Main Tour Begins: Nagano's 'Snow Monkeys' and a magnificent Serow

The main tour kicked off after breakfast in the lobby of the Royal Park Hotel at Tokyo's International Airport, with an expedition (of sorts) into the heart of Tokyo to catch the bullet train to Nagano.

Travelling by Japan's iconic Shinkansen train – with a top speed now of around 320 km/h – is by far the quickest way to reach the snow monkey park and I was keen for the group to have a full afternoon recce with these iconic animals. But it does mean navigating Tokyo's metro and monorail system; hulking bags up lifts and escalators and trying to not use the wrong ticket, of a multiplying number of tickets, at the automated gates.

For some group members, this was their first experience of Tokyo – the world's most populous metropolis with an urban area of around 38 million people – and whose endless gleaming sprawl stands in stark contrast to the forested wilderness of Hokkaido.

I personally love this city and have always found traversing its rail network and streets to be less stressful than London; here commuters appear to move like flocks of birds and every street corner can yield either a mind-boggling number of baffling businesses, or a quiet red Torii-gated Shinto shrine, complete with animist statues.

It was a beautifully bright morning when our monorail skimmed into the megacity. Two metro changes later and we were on the platform awaiting the bullet train to Nagano, hot Tokyo vending-machine coffee and green tea bottles in hand. The Shinkansen was so quick that when it pulled into Nagano, known to many of us as the host of the 1998 Winter Olympics, we emerged from the train, almost blinking and bewildered in the sunlight.

A quick coffee stop and hire-car collection later, and we were driving through the snowy suburbs of Nagano and towards the small hot spring village of Kanbayashi Onsen. The Jigokudani Monkey Park forms part of the Joshinetsu Kogen National Park, set in the valley of the Yokoyu River. Our base for three nights here was the rather fine Ryokan Biyunoyado, a hotel with traditional Japanese-style rooms (think

soft rush-woven Tatami floor mats, a surprisingly comfortable futon, low table and green tea and sweet accoutrements, and balconies with mountain views.

The hotel also served as an entry point for two of the mainstay cultural features of our tour: the evening onsen experience and the multi-course Japanese feast. As far as the onsens go, admittedly, it can feel a bit daunting to bathe naked with strangers; divided into male and female spas, these hot spring baths typically feature one or more inside pools and an outside one where we would sometimes find ourselves bathing amid the steam as the snow fell softly around us. But – particularly in the wintry north of Hokkaido – these deeply-relaxing baths became a place to both properly warm up and share some great conversations.

The nightly dinners – and also the beautifully presented breakfasts – were frequently taken in our own private dining room and cooked in front of us on a type of super-charged tea-light grill, setting the stage for what we would experience throughout the trip. Usually beginning with plates of sashimi or variations of tofu and yam, the small dinner plates would pass through rounds of rice, miso, often four or five incredibly healthy fish, meat or vegetable dishes and onto other courses that can be baffling for even those of us who've spent a lot of time in Japan. "Yuku, what IS this? Oh, you're not entirely sure either. Maybe a type of root vegetable that's only grown in Japan? Why is it cut into star shapes?" etc etc.

Onto the monkey park and the reason we'd come here. Japan's famous 'snow monkeys' are wild Japanese Macaques that live around the Jigokudani valley, which literally translates as 'Hell Valley' due to the region's intense geothermal activity. Getting into the park from the car park involves a good 30 minute hike through a pretty snowy forest, mostly easy-going enough but with sections of steps and some frozen patches that require holding on to the wooden handrail. The woods form part of Japan's 'Nihonkai Montane Forest' – dense, deciduous mountain forest characterised by endemic beech, cherry, Katsura and hornbeam trees.

The hike could be enjoyable on our morning walk in. We'd frequently be the first to arrive at the monkey park entrance, sometimes spotting Jays, Hawfinch and an Alpine Accentor, with the last section passing the bridge that led to the small cosy spa restaurant where we'd have lunch – and where macaques would suddenly appear and scamper along beside us in such a way that this part of the tour could be renamed 'Walking with Monkeys.'

Japanese macaques are highly intelligent monkeys who already display up some pretty interesting behaviour even before one of them – a juvenile known as 'Tokiwa' – dived into a hot spring following a fallen apple, back in the 1960s, and seemed to enjoy its bathing experience so much that others followed suit and the behaviour spread to the entire troop.

Not only are they the most northerly living non-human primate, but their troops are matrilineal in construct; dominance passes from mother to daughter and troops are led by both an alpha male AND alpha female (human primates, take note.)

They are the only non-human primates where grandmothers have been observed raising abandoned grandchildren, and also partake in some other fairly cool auxiliary activities, such as rolling snowballs for fun and washing food in fresh water before then dipping it in salt to enhance the taste.

Up in Jigokudani, it's easy to forget that the monkeys are all wild; numbers plunged following the building of the ski resort in the 1950s, with the harsh winters and scarcer food supplies already contributing to population stress. Now the troop number here is in excess of 200 monkeys. I tried in vain to count the large number of newly-born infants and juveniles – while staff at the monkey park provide small amounts of barley seed to supplement the troop's natural food-finding activities.

Our two and a half days at the monkey park proved to be a good amount of time to really get some interesting images. Around the large open air hot spring bath itself, the juvenile macaques, in particular, had clearly never visited a municipal swimming pool where a sign would indicate that 'no diving, petting, bombing and ducking' would be tolerated. It's a challenge to capture a monkey, mid-air, as it either jumps into the water or leaps out, shaking droplets from its fur, As well as the action of the main pool – where monkeys get so close that several either jumped over me, as I crouched down, or sat just just inches away – favourite spots included the lower river-side, where macaques chase each other and leap clean over the water, and along the bridge, where all manner of fighting and grooming activities take place along the snowy banks at either end.

Although we had no falling snow during our time there, the deep snow banks surrounding the river and the hot bath made for a suitably wintry backdrop; often macaques would dig for barley seed, their fur and faces covered in snow. And for lovers of portraits and behavioural shots, there was plenty to fill your boots. Juvenile macaques have such thick hooded fur coats that they almost resemble

Ewoks from a Star Wars movie, while the expressions on the faces of many of the habituated monkeys makes for impressive close-ups.

On our last day, we were just about to gather for our lunch break of hot noodle soup when a Japanese Serow silently slid down the snowy bank by the park's river bridge, stopping just a few metres away to take in the crowd of photographers below. As a normally solitary and shy animal, this endemic goat-antelope – renowned for its incredible speed and agility – clearly realised it was now the subject of intense interest. But it took its time, nonchalantly sliding ever-closer towards us, allowing for great portraits. Then, before anyone could blink, it was under the bridge, had leapt over the river and was scaling the hill opposite. We felt genuinely lucky to have such an incredible Serow sighting!

On to Hokkaido: The unforgettable dance of the Red-crowned Cranes

The following morning, we retraced our journey back into Tokyo, making good enough time to enjoy a few hours' wandering in the region of the city around the Tokyo Central station. Half of us strolled over to the gardens of the Imperial Palace, the main residence of the Emperor of Japan, taking in some Tufted Ducks swimming in the moat. We lunched at a French bakery before taking the monorail back to the airport for our evening flight to Hokkaido.

As the northernmost island of the Japanese archipelago, Hokkaido receives more snow than any other location at this latitude on earth. Home of the great Daisetsu Mountain range – and to ten of Japan's most active volcanoes and peaks – the region is known as 'The Playground of the Gods' by the island's indigenous Ainu people, because so many god spirits join the brown bears roaming on its slopes.

Most of northern Hokkaido experienced continuous permafrost in the last ice age, giving the island a very different feel from the rest of Japan. Subarctic conifers, such as Ezo Spruce and Sakhalin Fir, fill forests along with hardy deciduous, such as Japanese Birch and Beech.

To the south lies the green choppy watchers of the Tsugaru Strait, while its northeastern quarters slam into the Sea of Okhotsk, whose waves eventually wash up on the coast of Siberia. Hokkaido is home to some of Japan's most spectacular wildlife – but, for us, the first port of call were the feeding grounds of the totemic Red-crowned Cranes.

After arriving late the following evening, we primed ourselves for an early start to join the throngs of photographers we knew would gather on Otowa Bridge. This river bridge is a world-famous viewing point, overlooking a crane-roosting section of the Setsuri River with enough geothermal activity to not freeze. And if you're lucky enough to get a hoar frost – mist rising, and sun burning through to reveal the cranes dancing below – it can, indeed, yield stunning shots. But there are several variables that can make the experience land on the right side of magical – or a wildlife photographers' version of a bit of a bunfight.

Firstly, you need to get there early. Leaving our spa hotel, I trotted off to clear the frost off the car window, somewhere around the 4.15am mark. The temperature gauge read -19 degrees C; 'not so bad', I thought. By 5am, the bridge was lined with tripods – mostly from a large group of landscape photographers from Korea, many of whose tripods were chained to their chosen position and watched over by a lone guide, standing guard, as the photographers stayed warm in the cars along the road. This actually turned out to not be so much of a problem; especially if you are feisty – but polite – enough to not put up with this nonsense. We all found reasonable spots along the bridge, but it's the cold that eventually seeps in – together with the gathering crowds – that can make this the most waring experience of the trip.

Our time in Hokkaido coincided with a particularly harsh cold snap, so much so that the cranes were roosting even further from the bridge than normal, and were staying longer in the river before flying to the feeding grounds, necessitating the longest of lens shots. On our second morning at the bridge, where my car temperature gauge read -24 degrees C – and dropping to a bone-chilling -26 degrees C as we drove through the deep-snowy forests – we had a better system of keeping everyone in the car for longer, so the group didn't freeze quite so much. All this said, we had a beautiful hoar frost and sunrise on the two mornings we visited the bridge. Hearing the cranes waken in the mist, bugling to each other, before beginning to dance – wings raised and backs arched – is a sight unfailing in its magnificence.

After leaving the bridge an hour or so after sunrise on our first morning – and refuelling with hot coffee and pastries – we reached the famous Tsurui Ito Crane Sanctuary in good time before the 9am grain-feeding. The light was already quite harsh, and the snow somewhat trammelled from the cranes' feet, but the sight of around 200 cranes already at the farm – many engaged in dancing or swooping down through the birch trees – was nothing short of wonderful. These cranes are undoubtedly one of nature's most compelling wildlife spectacles.

The glorious 'Tancho', known as the 'God of the Marshes' is one of the largest crane species in the world. And (second only to Whooping Crane of North America) the rarest, with estimated numbers left now coming in at 2570 individuals. In the old days, killing of the Tancho was reserved for nobility, who hunted it with falcons, until Japan's Meji restoration made slaughtering the bird a free-for-all. Wiped out completely in Honshu, only a remnant band of 25 in Hokkaido, already half-starving, survived the harsh freeze of 1950 by farmers putting out grain.

Since then, several winter feeding stations and a ban on killing cranes have restored the Hokkaido flock to its current numbers of around 1,700 – making it the best site in the world to see these graceful birds.

The 104-square mile marsh, starting at the fishing town of Kushiro on the coast and spreading up to the Akan Mountains, now is the centre of protecting the Red-crowned cranes – who endure the coldest temperatures of any crane species.

If you're a photographer who enjoys trying Fine Art style images, spending days with the Red-crowned crane can tip you into overdrive with potential compositional options. Traditionally the bird is perceived as an emblem of the ying-yang of existence: the combination of the black neck, legs and secondary wing feathers, combining with white head and wings, topped off with a blood-red crown, are both a metaphor for 'All That Is' and minimalist delights – particularly when shot against snow. Over the next few days, many of us tried every combination of portrait technique – High Key images, slow shutter speed, isolating tiny features – even some in-camera Multiple Exposure.

As well as the main site at Tsurui Ito, we spent a lot of time at the Akan Crane Observation Centre, around 30 miles away, and enjoyable not only for its relaxed almost-free-of-other photographers vibe, but because it enabled us to get within metres of up to 60 dancing cranes, as well as a large flock of Whooper Swans that rested in the fields before banking off, honking over silvery-trunked trees of Japanese White Birch, gliding in and out of the mist.

One of our best lunches was also enjoyed at Akan, sun streaming through the restaurant windows, cranes bugling from the field nearby. Overall, we were incredibly lucky with the large numbers of Red-crowned Cranes that we continually saw. Yes, we had one day where the light was harsh and backlit, but on the next we were gifted perfect fresh – and falling – snow; a feature that only added to the beauty of the scenes in front of us.

At Akan, I watched one courtship dance between cranes that appeared to have added an extra element to their routine. As well as the classic deep bow, high leap, kick, arch, bugle (with beak skyward) set-up, one crane chose to pick up a large russet-coloured leaf – tossing it repeatedly into the air, so that it fluttered down in front of the object of its affection. His partner did the same with a similar offering. But….what is that? Sure enough, checking my images later I spotted the 'gift' offered by the second crane – as its own reciprocal dance prop – was a discarded white Covid face-mask, its unmistakable white strings wrapping around the bird's beak. It seemed both sad and poignant. And I'm not sure I have the words to describe which.

Rotating between Tsurui Ito and Akan on our full crane days, we stopped at a woodland site that's home to a very photogenic Ural Owl roost; the gorgeous owl dozing inside the huge hole of an ancient oak tree. Many of the group got shots with the owl's eyes briefly open. Back in the Tsurui village, we also discovered a lovely cafe / gift shop with a whole window of glass looking out to bird feeders, enabling us to enjoy coffee while watching a host of bird species – from the ubiquitous Lesser Spotted Woodpecker, to Coal Tits, Nuthatches and Brown-eared Bulbuls – to everyone's 'cutest' Hokkaido subspecies: the fluffy-feathered Long-tailed Tit, or 'Shima-Enaga' ('Snow Fairy).

Lake Kusshаro: Whooper Swans and Volcanic Vents

After a third full morning with the Snow Cranes at Tsurui Ito, we pressed on to Lake Kusshаro, a vast caldera that gives it the accolade of largest crater lake in Japan. En route, we stopped at a second Ural Owl site, this one even closer to us and set in a Narnia-style wooded forest – watchful owl eyes half-open as the snow fell silently down.

Throughout our time in Hokkaido, I'd become accustomed to driving in snow and on icy roads, and today was no different. Our excellent hire-cars and snow tyres made these conditions seem easy. But – after lunch and a reasonably slow drive due to the heavy falling snow – I was happy to arrive at Kotan Onsen, where the outflow from a natural hot spring pool keeps a small area of the lakeshore ice-free. It had stopped snowing and the late-afternoon light was beautiful; the steam from the spring appearing like mist and acting like a softbox for the large flock of Whooper Swans gathered in front of us – all backdropped by some of the lower-slung hills of the Akan Mashu National Park.

It was a good opportunity to try some very close-up shots of beak and feather. We took a variety of portrait and wide-angle images before stopping again further along the lakeshore at Sunaya, where more wintering Whooper Swans swam and honked in a larger patch of water, although in far-less favourable light. Arriving at our guesthouse later that afternoon was a real tonic. Away from the relative intensity of the crane activity at Tsurui, the Kussyaro Gasthof Papilio – run by a very gentle elderly couple and where we were the only guests – felt like arriving at a beautiful woodland cabin in the Canadian lakes; peaceful, restful, and with the grounds home to all manner of wildlife.

That night, we ate a delicious dinner in the guesthouse's cosy dining room, surrounded by piles of books, maps and embroidery projects. With a large old TV set and VHS recorder to the side of the table – I felt like it was the 1980s and I'd gone to my grandparents' home. I, for one, was deeply relaxed at 'sleepy cabin', even when the owners put on a surprisingly bleak wildlife film with no redemptive arc.

The next morning was equally calm. Some of us wandered down to the lakeshore at Sunaya, at first light, bird-spotting a lone Whooper Swan and White-tailed Eagle together with dark-furred Japanese Squirrel and Sika Deer. Back at the guesthouse for breakfast – complete with freshly-baked bread and butter and hot-brewed coffee – we spent a few hours photographing more tree squirrels and a variety of woodland birds, mostly Japanese Pygmy and Lesser Spotted Woodpeckers and a variety of tits.

Leaving Gasthof Papilio was a wrench. I'd already decided to stay for years and write the next great novel of the 21st century. But we had a late-night date (we hoped) with the world's biggest owl.

En route to our next main destination of Rausu, we stopped at the Mount Iozan Volcano viewpoint, home to a gift shop with a staggeringly high number of 'Snow Fairy' souvenirs and unusually-flavoured ice cream. More significantly, the viewpoint was right by the steaming sulphurous vents and neon-yellow deposits of the active Mount Iozan Volcano. Despite being rather diminutive (by volcano standards), it still allowed for some interesting shots.

Rausu: Clash of the Sea Eagles at Giant Owls along the 'End of the Earth' Peninsula

Driving into Rausu – the largest town on the eastern coast of Hokkaido's Shiretoko Peninsula – has the feel of a place accustomed to bitter weather and the hard graft of generations that rely on sea-fishing. This view perhaps isn't helped by its name, an Ainu word roughly translating as 'Place of men with beast-like spirit.'

Set beside the narrow Nemuro Strait – with the Russian-owned island of Sakhalin only 40km across the water, at its nearest point – Rausu's northern quarters are also lapped by the Sea of Okhotsk.

Hokkaido's Shiretoko Peninsula itself is a jutting landmass and pristine national park whose name literally means 'End of the Earth'. My attempts to find a local map that also stated 'Here be Dragons' were sadly in vain. In 2005, UNESCO named the Shiretoko Peninsula a World Heritage Site due to its abundance of wildlife and marine ecosystems. It's not only home to one of the densest populations of brown bears in the world (sadly all currently hibernating) but the region's winter-time drifting sea ice generates huge blooms of phytoplankton that then support a bounty of marine, bird and mammal life.

The peninsula is also regarded as the world's last 'safe haven' of one of nature's most impressive owls, a species known locally as 'Shima-fukuro' but elsewhere as the Blakiston's Fish Owl.

Classed as the world's biggest living owl, in terms of combined weight (up to 4.6kg for the larger females) and wingspan (reaching almost 2 metres – 6ft 7in), this species is experiencing huge issues due to habitat loss due to logging in old-growth riverine forest. There are now believed to be fewer than 1,000 pairs of these great birds remaining in the wild.

The best place to see the Blakiston's Fish Owl in the world is considered to be the small Rausu guesthouse of Washi No Yado, whose owners have been at the forefront of trying to encourage the survival of these great owls by leaving frozen fish in a snowy pool in winter. Previous Wild Images groups have stayed at the guesthouse – but a combination of slightly strange post-Covid rules about guests needing to stay in their bedrooms and view the owl from their windows, meant it was a better option to stay out of town and have the freedom to choose the strongest viewing point ourselves.

We checked into our nearby spa hotel – with traditional Japanese-style rooms – only ten minutes' drive from the harbour and Washi No Yado, with instructions from the owl specialist at the guesthouse instructing us to "not become before 5pm, as the pair of owls, which

include one pregnant female, have not been turning up recently until 4am.)

I have to be honest, I was finding the prospect of staying up all night – in what could be an 11-hour snowy-bank watching marathon – somewhat daunting. We swung by a 7-Eleven before arriving at Washi No Yado, to grab hand-warmers and a picnic dinner, while I stockpiled enough caffeinated products to keep a team of junior doctors awake for a week.

At Washi No Yado, the main viewing point for the owl hole is in the long-windowed (high-quality glass) restaurant that stands directly opposite the pool. But, together with two other group members, I opted for the empty small school bus, on a slight angle to the pool and heated by two fan heaters, which, thankfully, only stopped working after we'd finished.

The guesthouse logbook noted that the owls had not turned up at all the previous night. And before that, the male had put in an appearance at 1am, the female at 3am.

The snowy bank is lit by strobe lights that flash at around 1/90 of a second – but the recommended camera settings to accommodate this – and avoid black banding in your images – are a shutter speed of 1/80, aperture of 5.6 and ISO of approx 3200. Which, with a bit of tinkering, seemed about right. We had barely sat down and readied our kit when the male Blakiston's Fish Owl appeared on the branch outside, its hulking frame making for a truly impressive sighting. Before we knew it, he had flown into the snow hole, grabbed the fish and flown out; giant wings outstretched. After gobbling the fish down, he repeated the process – before being gone; merging into darkness just as quickly as he came.

Less than 30 minutes later, the larger female did the same, making for a staggering sight; you could almost hear the whooshing of her vast wings as she tried to generate enough uplift to exit the snowy pond. Altogether, it was a highly successful evening. We were in our beds by 9pm – and we were all hugely impressed by the owls we'd seen.

The tour allows for three full days in Rausu, mainly because of the temperamental behaviour of the much-desired pack ice, whose existence in the area of the Sea of Okhotsk, just off the coast of Rausu, has a huge bearing on our sea eagle experience, and whose presence is dependent on everything from temperature and sea currents to wind direction.

Expecting as we were, to have spent the following night up to the early hours waiting for owls, our plan for the next day was to drive along the tip of the Notsuke Peninsula – a 28km frozen sandback that connects with the Shiretoko, and known for its bird life. The freezing cold temperatures meant my hoped-for Asian Rosy Finches, and seals, never materialised. Instead we focused on Sika Deer and the Ezo Red Fox, who have been known to hunt by jumping high into the air and plunging head-first into the snow.

The Notsuke Peninsula makes for an other-worldly shard of wilderness. As we neared the park's visitor centre, where we would later eat lunch, we had some great encounters with herds of Sika Deer. Further along, sat patiently on a pile of fishing nets, was our first sighting of Hokkaido's enigmatic red fox; a subspecies with attractive black ear tips and limbs and a warmer-coloured coat than many other variants.

Heading towards the furthest point of the peninsula, the road effectively ran out. Some of the group stayed near the vehicles for an hour, looking for deer and other subjects. Others struck out to try and find more foxes. Around the fishing boats stacked up with snow (lying dormant until Spring) we had a phenomenal encounter with a particularly playful and confiding red fox, watching it slide down a snowbank, paws in the air, and happy to sit near us under a boat, before eventually disappearing among the scattered, and seemingly abandoned, fishing cottages.

As we drove back into Rausu before dark, we could see the sea ice had arrived; a great band of floating white shapes that form every winter in Siberia's portion of the Sea of Okhotsk and that constitutes the most southerly drift ice in the northern hemisphere.

The following morning, we boarded our small boat before dawn; one of around a dozen that took to the sea, each chugging out to its own portion of ice for an experience that constitutes many a wildlife photographer's dream. With heavy snow falling, and the sun yet to rise, a boat-worker threw fish to encourage the eagles down. First came the Steller's Sea Eagle – the biggest eagle in the world by weight – hugely distinctive with their hooked orange beaks and feet, heavily white-feathered legs like breeches, and bold pied colouration of dark brown / black contrasting with white.

If cartoonists for The Simpsons were tasked to draw an eagle – the Steller's would surely be what they came up with.

Shortly afterwards, the White-tailed swooped in, more masterful than the Steller's in stealth, and agility; always the victor in stealing fish from right under the Steller's beaks. At one point over the next hour and a half, I counted a combined total of more than 200 Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed around our boat and on the ice between us and Rausu; a dizzying number of subjects that made us all burn through our memory cards and barely pause, despite the biting cold.

Our second boat trip of the morning, just half an hour later and giving us time to grab a quick breakfast and coffee and warm-up, was even more spectacular. The heavy snow had given way to a much brighter morning. Chances of action shots and portraits, both with eagles on the ice and over the hills of Rausu, were plentiful. Other seabird activity included Slaty-backed Gulls, Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls, together with a Japanese Cormorant and Spectacled Guillemot. Highly exhilarated by our morning, but chilled to the bone, we headed back to our hotel, for onsen baths, before lunching above a seafood market. Later, we made a short drive north to harbour-hop along a series of tiny fishing ports, stopping to photograph Harlequin Ducks and some Greater Scaup in the waves. On our way home, we visited Rausu's Shinto Shrine, its red Torii gates looking down on the town below.

We were due to go out for our remaining two eagle boat trips the following day, but a storm blew in, with a wind speed that was due to make the temperature out at sea feel at least -28 degrees C. While I sat in the lobby before dawn, contemplating this prospect, Yuki arrived downstairs to tell me that our trips had been cancelled.

Instead, we headed back out along the Notsuke Peninsula to look for birdlife and for more fox and deer encounters, barely able to walk against the truly icy winds. That night, most of the female members of our group sat in the outside onsen at our hotel as the blizzard raged and snow fell on us; kept warm by 40 degree C steaming baths and making for a really special experience. After stepping out, I reckoned you had about two seconds to then rush to the inside onsen, before the cold smacks you around the head.

Because the temperatures had plummeted so low – and the next day was looking slightly calmer – I felt sure that a) our boat trips would go the next day (our last chance before heading south) and b) that the sea ice would be in the harbour. Alas, I was wrong on one crucial count. Yes, it had been absolutely freezing, but the winds had whacked the drift ice back into Siberia's side of the tennis court.

This time, the boat crew hurled the fish into the open sea – making for a different experience (and slightly harder photographically) but we adapted our techniques and it was still a great session of photography and a wonder to see. We'd been told that the second boat trip would not go and more than half the group were incredibly cold. So when a chance for our fourth trip opened up, most of the group opted to head south with Yuki towards our last hotel – the wonderful Nakashibetsu Yourishi Onsen – for some anticipated birding, with the remainers staying with me for a final bite of the great sea eagle cherry, following on an hour and a half later.

Frustratingly, the staff at our last, and most luxurious, of hotels insisted on cleaning the bird tables and outside wildlife area before they would allow our group in – and the hoped-for Japanese Martens were nowhere to be seen. As soon as I arrived, things were quickly sorted and we settled down for an afternoon photographing a number of birds: from Eurasian Jays and Brown Dippers to woodpeckers, buntings and tits. Not to mention a very territorial Brown-eared Bulbul, who guarded the feeders with an over-bearing manner.Before the light faded, a red fox also put in an appearance, padding along the river bank behind the decking.

The logbook at the spa hotel reported that a resident Blakiston's Fish Owl was putting in an appearance on the decking's fish platform (just two metres from the hotel's windows) at around 6pm and then again at 4am-ish.

So after some of the group had enjoyed an invigorating onsen, this one with six different baths to choose from, we sat in position – with the impressively vast owl obliging just before dinner. The owl was almost too close for my first-choice lens. And the photographic experience was slightly marred for others, due to the reflection in the glass of the drinks bar behind. But it remained a great encounter.

On our final morning, we regrettably left this fantastic hotel early for the 90 minute drive to the frozen Lake Furon, where fishermen leave out fish scraps for a mass of eagles. With far more White-tailed arriving than Steller's – and both outnumbered by large numbers of Black-eared Kites – this was still an impressive photographic experience, especially if you manage to capture the White-tailed Eagle's duking it out over fish scraps in the skies.

Leaving the lakeside, we were able to stop, for one final time, at the Tsurui Ito Crane Centre. The sunlight was harsh – so I tried a succession of in-camera multiple exposure shots, none of which really worked. We stopped at our favourite cafe for coffee, giving ourselves one last chance for some half-decent Long-tailed Tit images, before heading to Kushiro Airport and bringing the end of a long – but truly magical – tour.