

Japan: Winter Wildlife Spectacular Tour Report 2025

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"More snow falls on Hokkaido than at any other place at this latitude on Earth", I tell this year's Wild Images group as they arrive in Japan. A fairly standard fact, perhaps, and uttered with absolutely no hint of foreboding.

But within hours – bam! The island, and almost all of Japan, was blasted by record-breaking snowfall, heralding the start of a series of exceptional weather events. A succession of snowstorms, thumpingly heavy at times, combined with an unusual absence of lake and sea ice, ensured that the weather, itself, would become a main character on this year's tour.

For the most part, once we'd come to terms with the photographic challenges of shooting in blizzards (and the inevitable transportation delays caused by such meteorological convulsions) the conditions amplified the atmosphere of our time with many of Japan's most enigmatic species.

It gave another dimension to our days with the 'Snow Monkeys'. Watching infant Japanese Macaques shake huge flurries from their fur before sliding into the hot springs – while more seasoned monkeys sat serenely in the steam, 'hats' of snow growing ever larger on their heads – was an unquestionably charming experience.

Down in Kyushu, the snow that silently blanketed thousands of gathered Hooded and White-naped Cranes supplied a degree of visual calmness; a point of exhalation amid the normal avian chaos.

And the blizzards on particular morning's Steller's Sea Eagle and White-tailed Eagle boat trip brought an almost ghostly aspect to the voyage; hulking raptor apparitions appearing – then disappearing – in a shroud of snowfall.

But then the Wild Images 'Japan: Winter Wildlife Spectacular' tour has long been one that serves up great portions of enchantment.

There is, undoubtedly, a magic in the first time you see a Red-crowned Crane's mesmeric dance, or the world's mightiest sea eagles clash. Or in the swoop of the achingly rare Blakiston's Fish Owl – the biggest owl on Earth – as it dives into an icy pond.

This year's tour had some genuinely sublime encounters with all of our main target species: 'Snow monkeys' (Japanese Macaques,) Red-crowned Crane, Blakiston Fish Owl, Steller's Sea Eagle and White-tailed Eagles.

And then there was our lovely experiences with the Ezo Red Fox of Hokkaido, Whooper Swans, Ezo Sika Deer, Ural Owl, Black-eared Kite and even a few 'Snow Fairies' – the famously cute Hokkaido sub-species of Long-tailed Tit.

Glimpses of Japanese Serow – together with (for our pre-extension group) Hooded and White-naped Crane, Japanese Raccoon Dog and Japanese Weasel sightings – combined with encounters with many smaller bird species to complete our wildlife odyssey.

The Pre-tour Extension: Kyushu's Great Gathering of the Cranes

It's sometimes easy to forget that Japan is actually an archipelago of more than 14,000 islands, 400 of them inhabited, that drape for more than 3000 km along the Pacific coast of Asia.

During the main Wild Images tour, we visit two: Honshu (the largest and most populous of the four 'main islands') and Hokkaido: Japan's great northern wilderness.

But it's the southerly island of Kyushu that's the draw for our pre-tour extension. Our focus: the world-famous wintering grounds of thousands of cranes at Arasaki, a birding spectacle in its own right.

Meeting at Tokyo's bustling Haneda Airport, we caught the early-morning flight to the Kyushu city of Kagoshima, before jumping into our large Hyundai Grand Cabin minivan (driven by our Japanese co-guide and birding specialist Otani-san) and headed north.

Kyushu itself is dominated by the imposing presence of Mount Aso, both Japan's most active volcano and – thanks to its vast caldera – also one of the largest in the world.

Together with its proximity to the warm Kurishio ocean current, the island's normally subtropical climate (more on this later) means Kyushu is particularly renowned for high numbers of endemic plant and dragonfly life. And, of course, its wintering cranes.

As we pulled up in Arasaki, most of the group had their first experience of two features of Japanese culture that are mainstays of this tour.

One, a picnic-style lunch from one of the famous 7-Eleven style convenience stores that pepper the Japanese roadsides. These stores contain such a vast array of snack and lunch options – many of them unique to Japan, and, admittedly some of them as bewildering as they are novel – that lunching here could almost be classed as a culinary experience in its own right.

And two, by checking into our traditional Ryokan (Japanese style guest-house) next to the International Crane Observation Centre. Unlike some of the more luxurious accommodation in the main tour, this family-run inn – largely unchanged since the 8th Century AD and with traditional Japanese tatami mat beds and communal baths – is, undeniably, an austere place.

Rolling out your futon style bed (while sipping Green Tea) in the middle of a bird sanctuary, definitely makes you know you're in Japan. Yet this guesthouse cannot be beaten for location, especially with the bugling of thousands of cranes audible from the rooms.

Arasaki itself is an area of flooded rice paddies located on the fringes of the coastal city of Izumi. For more than 300 years, a congregation of cranes – primarily the elegant Hooded Crane and strikingly beautiful White-naped – have journeyed from their breeding grounds in Russia, northeast China and the Korean Peninsula to settle in Arasaki's patches of reclaimed land for the winter.

Yet this centuries-old annual migration has not been all plain sailing. In the 1950s, populations of these graceful birds crashed, with fewer than 300 birds making the journey each year.

The local people, many of them desperately poor themselves in the post-WWII years, saved to feed the cranes corn, gradually enabling numbers to swell back up to the thousands. No wonder the relationship between the cranes and the local Arasaki and Izumi population is such a poignant one.

More than 80% of the world's Hooded Cranes now winter here, with recent estimates that half of the world's remaining 6,000 White-naped – suffering from decades of habitat degradation – doing the same.

After dropping our bags in our rooms, we headed out in the drizzly rain to photograph our first cranes. According to the Arasaki Crane Observation Centre notice-boards, 12,992 cranes had arrived in the fields this year – with total numbers slightly increasing from the last time I was here, 12 months ago.

These numbers included 12,036 Hooded Cranes (an increase of around 2,500 from last year, when bird flu had affected the colony).

But – notably – only 948 of the stately White-naped Cranes – at least 2,000 fewer than last year – had arrived. Whether the warmer winter temperatures in Russia and China have meant fewer White-naped made the journey, or other factors have come into play, had yet to be determined.

The roll-call of cranes from the latest count (conducted only ten days' previously) also included 3 Sandhill, 4 Common and a solitary hybrid. Sometimes a lone Siberian Crane makes its way to Arasaki, but we were without luck on this one, this year.

Due to their protected status, 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 – looking slightly down – or to photograph at eye-level over the nets in front of the main grain-feeding paddy field.

Another option is to drive along the network of small roads around the paddy fields, hoping to capture both intimate family portraits and any hint of a courtship display from the stately White-naped.

Standing nearly 1.3 meters tall, with their droopy pearl-grey wings and distinctive red faces, these White-naped cranes – among the group's favourite species of the tour – are definitely majestic-looking birds.

And it was by standing on the balcony roof, on that first afternoon, looking down at the thronging mass of cranes, that we first spotted a Japanese Raccoon Dog, being pestered by a flock of crows.

Like many Japanese species, these animals- known as 'Tanuki' – are imbued with a mythical status, In Japanese folklore, they beat their belly-drums in the forest to terrify unsuspecting humans. Other tales speak of the Raccoon Dog's ability to shape-shift.

Although our sighting wasn't close enough for decent photographs – similar to our glimpse of a cinnamon-furred Japanese Weasel, the following day – it's still a delight just to see these mammals in the wild.

Arising before dawn, the following day, shows how the true spectacle of Arasaki comes to life. Hopping into the Hyundai before first light we sped to a road near the eastern paddy fields, where thousands of cranes gather before flying the half-mile back to the fields in front of the Crane Observation Centre for more grain.

This pattern of movement allows for a multitude of flight shots. There's the chance to try both slow-shutter speed panning-style creative shots, or straight action shots, as the cranes fly overhead. Even just putting the camera down and watching huge ribbons of these birds streaming across the sky, their calls trumpeting the arrival of first light, can make for a breathtaking experience.

Despite the persistently stubborn grey skies – we had no hint of sunrise at Arasaki this year – our first morning still gave us plenty of crane action to play with.

My favourite shots were taken at ground-level in front of the main feeding paddy field, as thousands of Hooded and White-naped Crane circled above us. The cranes are followed by flocks of Mallards, Northern Pintails, Crows and, finally, Black-eared Kites.

Capturing the perfect crane congregation shot at Arasaki can prove challenging, particularly in the post Bird Flu regulation years, where farmers scatter corn more widely to avoid overcrowding. Additionally, the paddy fields themselves can reflect a lot of light, and can be muddy and untidy, while the sheer number of cranes means you are continually having to think about which birds – and in which focal plane – to aim your lens.

Yet with patience, and with a willingness to try different photographic techniques, Arasaki can provide some striking and unusual images.

After our first morning's dawn shoot, and following a much-needed breakfast, we headed out around the larger network of fields, in search of other birds. Sightings of the Sandhill and Common Cranes took our crane tally to four. While other birding highlights from our strolls in the wider Arasaki area included some Japanese Grosbeaks, a lovely sighting of some grooming Black-faced and Eurasian Spoonbill, a variety of Corvids, Ducks and Egrets, a Green Pigeon, and both Pale and Dusky Thrush.

That evening, we saw news that our anticipated partial-sunrise session had morphed into a snow warning. Kyushu enjoys a largely sub-tropical climate, yet we had all found this region particularly cold, this year. Although snow is not unheard of in Kyushu, if it does fall, it tends to be very light.

The next morning, the first flakes began to fall as we headed out to capture flight shots of the thousands of cranes flying overhead; a session quickly abandoned due to the lower light conditions – not to mention and the difficulty of avoiding a lens full of snow when pointing upwards to the sky.

Pulling up outside the feeding fields of the Crane Observation Centre was a different story. We experienced a few fleeting moments of stunning side-light, making the White-naped Cranes feathers (in particular) shine like silver against the darker hills. But, before long, the snow was coming down in earnest, huge flakes blanketing the gathered throngs of birds, giving a softness to the scenes in front of us.

Every 20 minutes or so, we were forced to take a break from the snow to retreat into the common room area of our guesthouse – to warm our hands and dry our gear.

Both Otani-san and I had made the decision, the previous evening, to leave Arasaki five hours early and avoid the normal route back to the airport, which requires the vehicle to climb some hills.

Due to the lack of snow, most hire-vehicles in Arasaki do not come equipped with snow tyres or chains (unlike the more northerly islands). With this in mind, we headed towards the main highway along the coast, huge waves now crashing on the foreshore, with the hope of perhaps having a sliver of time to find some Brown Booby along the way.

But a series of snow-related traffic accidents meant that authorities suddenly made the decision to close down all roads in our area of Kyushu – strangely shutting both ends of major thoroughfares at the same time, leaving motorists who were caught in the middle trapped.

We spent the following five hours immobile – in a state of suspension – until finally police opened up a section of the highway, enabling us to slowly crawl through the restrictions. Finally, we were able to motor towards the airport, leaving just enough time to grab a rushed dinner and catch our (later) flight back to Tokyo to sleep, ahead of the start of the main tour.

The Main Tour Begins: Hell Valley and the ‘Snow Monkeys’ – Japan’s iconic Winter Wildlife species

Our main tour began after breakfast in the lobby of the Royal Park Hotel at Tokyo International Airport, where three new tour members – who’d skipped the pre-tour extension in Kyushu – joined our lovely group. We gathered our luggage and headed into the heart of Tokyo to board the bullet train to Nagano.

Traveling via Japan’s iconic Shinkansen, reaching speeds of about 320 km/h, is the fastest way to reach the iconic ‘Hell Valley’, home of the Jigokudani Snow Monkey Park. The bullet train can be a novel experience and enables us to have a full afternoon ‘recce’ session with these incredibly engaging primates – allowing tour-members to get a ‘lay of the land’ for the following two days.

However, it also involves navigating Tokyo’s extensive metro and monorail system, maneuvering bulky bags up lifts and escalators (which is no mean feat first thing in the morning) while avoiding the wrong ticket among a multitude of options at the automated gates.

For some members of our group, this was their first taste of Tokyo, the world’s most populous metropolis with an urban population of around 38 million. And – admittedly – it can be a daunting one.

Personally, I have always enjoyed the Monorail journey into the city, in particular. Tokyo was originally built up by the Tokugawa Shogunate, deliberately designed with a myriad of dead-ends and T-junctions to confuse invaders.

Gliding towards Tokyo Station, these highly interconnected streets start to unfold, with every corner seemingly revealing either a perplexing (to Western eyes) business or a tranquil Torii-gated Shinto shrine.

This morning’s Shinkansen arrived with characteristic efficiency. As we disembarked in Nagano – renowned for hosting the 1998 Winter Olympics – barely 90 minutes later, snow again started to fall, giving high hopes for some snowfall with the monkeys.

After a quick coffee stop and car rental, we drove through the suburbs of Nagano toward the quaint hot spring village of Kanbayashi Onsen.

The Jigokudani Monkey Park itself lies just ten minutes’ drive from our hotel, within the scenic Joshinetsu Kogen National Park. Its particular location is nestled in the Yokoyu River valley – also known, somewhat portentously, as ‘Hell Valley’, due to its geothermal activity rather than any outward manifestation of eternal damnation.

Our home for the following three nights was the classic Ryokan Biyunoyado. A hotel featuring traditional Japanese-style rooms with tatami mats, (mostly) comfortable futons, low tables, sweet treats, and balconies with stunning mountain views.

The ryokan also introduced us to two of the cultural highlights of our tour: the evening onsen experience and the multi-course Japanese feast.

While bathing nude with strangers in the onsens can initially be intimidating, the gender-segregated hot springs often feature both indoor and outdoor pools where, very quickly, the steam and warmth relax even the sorest of muscles. Onsens can become addictive. They are a wonderful place to warm up and engage in unhurried conversations.

Similarly, our beautifully-presented nightly dinners and breakfasts offered an extensive showcase of Japanese cuisine, providing a cultural experience in their own right. Our meals were typically served in our own private dining room, with some courses cooked on a specialized tea-light grill in front of us.

This culinary showcase set the tone for our entire trip, with dinners beginning with plates of sashimi or variations of tofu and yam and progressing through rice, miso, and an array of occasionally baffling fish, meat, and vegetable dishes.

Dinner times were often a source of novelty and amusement – with clients later attempting to eat fries with chop-sticks. Occasionally, dishes were met with bafflement, with even Otani-san unsure of what local delicacy we were eating.

After a quick bag drop and lunch stop on that first day, we headed up to Jigokudani Monkey Park. Japan's iconic 'snow monkeys' – Japanese Macaques – thrive in the Jigokudani valley, having learned to bask in the hot springs as a unique adaptation to the freezing winter temperatures.

Accessing the park from the parking area requires a scenic 40-minute hike through a snowy forest. It can be an enjoyable trek, but the steeper sections (steps with handrails) and some icy patches, can necessitate some careful navigation.

These woods, part of Japan's 'Nihonkai Montane Forest,' are home to dense, deciduous trees such as beech, cherry, Katsura, and hornbeam, and occasionally reveal birdlife such as Jays and Alpine Accentor.

One morning on our trip – just ahead of us – Otani-san caught a fleeting glimpse of a Copper Pheasant fighting with a Goshawk. On our final afternoon, most of the group enjoyed a decent sighting of the endemic Serow, a shy goat-antelope that's one of my favourite Japanese species.

Japanese Macaques themselves are remarkably intelligent monkeys that exhibited intriguing behaviors even before a juvenile – known as 'Tokiwa' – dived into a hot spring chasing a fallen apple in the 1960s. Tokiwa's clear enjoyment of this first toasty swim encouraged others to join in, spreading this behavior – as learned behaviour – throughout the troop.

Japanese Macaques now have the joint accolade of not only being the most northerly non-human primates – but also the only monkeys known to enjoy hot spring bathing.

Notably, these matrilineal monkeys are also the only non-human primates that have been observed to raise abandoned grandchildren. They also engage in playful behaviour, such as rolling snowballs and washing food in fresh water, before adding salt to enhance the flavour.

During our two and a half days at the monkey park, I attempted to count the number of primates (at least 200) as staff provided barley seed to supplement the troop's natural food source. The macaques come so close to humans that it's easy to forget that they're completely wild.

Our morning sessions typically lasted from 9 a.m. to noon, with a lunch of noodles and corn soup at the adjacent traditional ryokan (enabling us to dry out a little and warm up.) Afternoon sessions normally lasted a few hours, before the cold temperatures and snowfall meant that even the hardest wildlife photographers in our group were dreaming more of steaming hot chocolate than monkey antics.

Inside the park, the main hot springs pool has always been the first port of call to capture the classic shots of 'snow monkeys' submerged in the water, as steam swirls around them. And it's a genuine photographic challenge to capture macaques in mid air as they chase one another around this outdoor bath – jumping in, leaping out – or shaking droplets from their fur.

As well as the action of the pool – where monkeys sometimes get so close that I have, on several occasions, been used by particularly cheeky individuals as a boulder to leap from – favourite spots include the lower river and looking down from the bridge at the snowy banks, where all manner of fighting and grooming activities take place.

Having a reasonable expanse of time here allows for some really emotive images; both portraits and behavioural shots. Juvenile macaques have such thick hooded fur coats that they almost resemble little humans in fur coats, or Ewoks from a Star Wars movie. And some of the primate facial expressions make for genuine captivating close-ups.

The afternoon on our first full day, in particular, provided some of the most engaging monkey behaviour I've ever seen here. Many of our group spent hours mesmerised by the juvenile macaques twirling from branches and playing on the riverbank.

And it was the first time I've witnessed a properly organised 'snow monkey' fight; several macaques ganging up on one individual who'd clearly committed some primate transgression – culminating in a high speed, high drama, chase across the river.

But it was our last day here that will now forever be bookmarked as my quintessential snow monkey experience.

We'd driven to the park in blizzards, having woken up to some of the heaviest snowfall I've seen in this region in years. Braving the wooded walk through 'Hell Valley,' we quickly realised several things: firstly that the crowds had stayed away, meaning we had a few hours of the park largely to ourselves and a few other hardy photographer souls.

Secondly, the heavy snowfall – while stunning to witness, draping as it did over the limbs and heads of the macaques, and turning even the darkest rocks of the main pool a pristine white – could be tough to photograph through.

Sometimes our only option was to manual-focus, or spot focus, on a monkey's eye; the snow and mist appearing as a veil akin to shooting through frosted glass.

Finally, after lunch, the snow abated – and we returned to capture our last primate action before heading back through the snowy woods, past the Serow, for hot apple pie at a small cabin kiosk.

Leaving the Nagano area the next morning was no easy task. Another snowstorm meant heavy delays on the normally extremely-efficient Shinkansen; we ourselves were stuck on the bullet train for three hours longer than normal as it crawled towards Tokyo, sometimes not moving at all.

The delays meant that we had to abandon the tour's normal programme of free time and a wander to Tokyo's Imperial Palace. Otani-san and I arranged for some of the group to catch a taxi transfer straight to the airport, for lunch there, while I and the rest of the group made a dash to one of the capital's camera mega-stores, in the hope of buying an extender for one of the group (and batteries for others.)

I breathed a sigh of relief as our evening flight to the Hokkaido city of Kushiro took off on-time – no guaranteed feat, given that many other flights that day were cancelled.

Onwards to Hokkaido: Japan's Great Wilderness Island and the Dance of the Red-crowned Cranes

There's something very special about Hokkaido. I feel it the moment we touch down on its heavily volcanic soil – albeit soil covered with several feet of snow. Hokkaido's northern reaches experienced continuous permafrost during the last ice age, imparting a distinctively subarctic character to the land.

The island is home to the majestic Daisetsu Mountain range and ten of Japan's most active volcanoes. Referred to as 'The Playground of the Gods' by its indigenous Ainu community, Hokkaido is a spiritual place, with many a tale of divine spirits that roam its lonely uplands.

Subarctic conifers, such as Ezo Spruce and Sakhalin Fir, mingle with hardy deciduous trees like Japanese Birch and Beech. To the south lie the turbulent waters of the Tsugaru Strait, while Hokkaido's northeastern coast meets the powerful waves of the Sea of Okhotsk, whose tides reach the shores of Siberia.

This island is renowned for its spectacular wildlife – both in summer and winter. For us, our first destination was the feeding grounds of the iconic Red-crowned Crane (*Grus japonensis*) famed for its majestic courtship dance.

After checking into our spa hotel at dinner time, we prepared for three focused days of photography, starting with an early venture to Otowa Bridge.

In an ancient defence against mammal predators now all but gone, the cranes of Kushiro roost in streams – the largest group in the Akan River but others in the Setsuri.

The famous Otowa bridge – beloved by landscape photographers – can offer breathtaking views of cranes roosting along the Setsuri River, which remains unfrozen due to nearby geothermal activity.

If you're lucky, you may witness a magical scene: mist rising as the sun breaks over the horizon, illuminating the cranes who wake, bugle and start to dance – their wings raised and backs arched – in the waters below.

But on both mornings that we tried the bridge – necessitating an exceedingly early start in freezing temperatures and enduring the inevitable crowds of tripod-wielding photographers – we were unlucky.

For the past few years now, the cranes have taken to roosting further and further away from the bridge; often mere pinpricks to the naked eye and needing a lens of 500mm or more to even have a hope of capturing them. Some of the group gave up, and instead focused on photographing a curious Ezo Fox that padded along the bank behind us.

Undeterred, we grabbed a quick 7-Eleven breakfast of pastries and coffee and headed to the Tsurui Ito Crane Sanctuary, arriving well before the 9 a.m. grain feeding session to get the best position against the fence-line. Soon, the cranes began to soar in, often in pairs or small family groups.

The magnificent Red-crowned Crane, also known as 'Tanco' in Japan, or 'God of the Marshes,' ranks among the largest crane species in the world. It is also the second rarest (following the Whooping Crane) with an estimated population of only 3,000 individuals.

Until the late 19th century, the Tanco was hunted exclusively by nobility, using falcons, primarily for their exquisite feathers. Yet the Meiji Restoration – with its focus on democracy – opened the door to widespread slaughter, resulting in the complete extinction of the species on Honshu, and leaving just 25 surviving in Hokkaido.

Similarly to the wintering cranes of Arasaki in Kyushu, this dwindling and half-starving flock only survived in the harsh winter of 1950 thanks to the grain provided by local farmers.

Since then, winter feeding stations and a ban on hunting have allowed the Hokkaido population to swell to around 1,700, making it the best place in the world to observe these elegant birds.

The focus of conservation efforts is the 104-square-mile Hokkaido marsh, beginning at the fishing town of Kushiro and extending to the Akan Mountains.

Our mornings with the cranes centered around the Tsurui Ito Crane Sanctuary, with as many as 200 cranes flying in after first light. I love our time here; for photographers pursuing fine art imagery, immersing oneself in the world of the Red-crowned Crane offers endless compositional possibilities.

The combination of striking black neck, legs, and wing feathers contrast beautifully with this crane's white head and wings, and vivid blood-red crown – particularly when photographed against snow.

To then capture these graceful birds dancing is an unfailing spectacular, and frequently hypnotic, wildlife spectacle. Courtship moves include deep bows, pirouettes, high kicks and impressive leaps of up to five feet, before bugling with their backs arched and beaks held skyward.

Sometimes cranes dance alone, or in pairs. Or one dancing couple can set off a ripple effect that radiates through the gathered flock, with birds dancing in every direction.

Over the following two and a half days, we experimented with various photography techniques, capturing portraits and action shots through high-key images, slow shutter speed techniques, close-ups and video.

In addition to the Tsurui Ito site, we spent ample time at the Akan Crane Observation Centre. This serene location offered a refreshing retreat, allowing us to observe up to 100 dancing cranes up close, alongside a flock of Whooper Swans that honked melodically over the silvery trunks of Japanese White Birches.

Our best lunches were also enjoyed here, with sunlight streaming through a nearby restaurant windows as cranes called from the nearby fields.

At times, the sheer number of cranes dancing made it challenging to know where to focus. The gatherings at both Akan and Tsurui presented their own challenges for capturing clean shots, but witnessing such a significant congregation of a species with so few remaining in the wild is a true privilege.

As we rotated between Tsurui Ito and Akan on our full crane days, we also visited a woodland site home to a photogenic Ural Owl, dozing in the cavity of an ancient oak.

Similarly to previous tours here, I like to head to Akan for our final morning with the 'snow cranes'. Here, just as hoped, the frosty conditions allowed us to achieve some of the group's most treasured shots: cranes bugling with their breath visible, like puffs of smoke,

against the darkened trees.

Lake Kussharo: Whooper Swans and a Stunning Sunrise

Saying goodbye to the cranes, we journeyed on to Lake Kussharo, the grandest of Japan's crater lakes. Along the way, we paused at another Ural Owl site before spending 20 minutes trying to capture a tiny flock of Long-tailed Tits (lightning quick as they flitted around a tree looking for berries).

Our focus at Lake Kussharo: the Whooper Swans. Every year these graceful birds escape the freezing winds of Siberia and Mongolia to winter on these snow-draped shores.

The whole scene is backdropped by the picturesque low hills of the Akan Mashu National Park, making it a haven for photographers.

Usually, the lake itself presents as a frozen tableau, the swans dabbling in a small patch of unfrozen water around a thermal spring, rising steam offering ethereal photographic opportunities.

However, as we pulled up, my growing concerns about the warmer-than-average winter (with the cold snap only coming once we arrived in Japan) were realised: for the first time in living memory, Lake Kussharo hadn't frozen.

Shots of the swans further down the lakeshore at Sunaya, in the flat afternoon light, also weren't doing much to inspire creativity, even as it started – again – to snow.

Keen not to be too disappointed, we pressed on to lunch at the nearby Mount Iozan Volcano viewpoint, home to a gift shop with a staggeringly high number of 'Snow Fairy' souvenirs and a good place to stop for curried buns and toast.

The viewpoint's cafe sits just a short stroll from the steaming sulphurous vents and neon-yellow deposits of the active Mount Iozan Volcano – which is definitely worth a few shots in itself.

After this late lunch, we pressed on to our spa hotel, consoling ourselves either with a dip in the luxurious onsen, or with the free bar. The buffet-style dinner here was generally agreed to be among the best of the tour, with not only a huge amount of choice, but also free beer and wine on tap.

Spotting that there was a chance of a sunrise the following morning, I broke with the normal tour schedule to suggest we try for the 5am start and a chance of some nice light on the lake. Not expecting any group members to join me, I was surprised to turn up at reception to find almost everyone there.

It was a good call: the sunrise colours that morning – especially as the light reflected off the snowy mountains and lake waters – were stunning. To see the swans gradually swim towards us, soft colours of pink and lilac all around them (and with mist in the distance) was sunrise perfection.

Onwards to Rausu: the Notsuke Peninsula and a date with the World's Biggest Owl

Given that we had already visited the Mount Iozan Volcano spot – a side-trip we normally keep for this morning – Otani-san and I agreed that we would instead spend several hours at the Notsuke Peninsula, looking for Ezo Foxes and Sika Deer.

The Notsuke Peninsula is an attractive stretch of wilderness that connects with the more famous Shiretoko Peninsula, and is known for its bird life. Along the black-stone shores of this 28 km long frozen sandbank, ice floes drift ashore, while its stark landscape is dotted with snow-covered fishing boats, reed grass, and the occasional solitary cottage.

Arriving at the peninsula, we first turned our attention to capturing images of the graceful Yezo Sika Deer, a Hokkaido subspecies that are one of the largest of all Sika Deer. Fawns and hinds can often be found wandering around the boats, while a few stags – with beautiful antlers – fed on the grassy tussocks that lie above the foreshore.

Further along the peninsula, we managed to get a few images of our first Ezo Fox, sat snoozing in the bright sunlight on a pile of fishing nets. Ezo Foxes (a Hokkaido subspecies also known as the Sakhalin Fox) are famed for their acrobatic hunting leaps, often ending with a dive into the snow to catch unsuspecting prey.

Later, we tried to capture some fast-flitting Asian Rosy Finches and a second fox, while Otani-san pointed out Ring-necked Ducks and a Red-faced Cormorant down by a nearby harbour.

By lunchtime, we were forced to press on again as we had a night-time date with the world's biggest owl, and didn't want to miss it!

Driving into Rausu – our base for the next few nights – you get the feel of a place accustomed to harsh weather and the hard graft of generations of locals that rely on sea-fishing. This impression perhaps isn't helped by its name: Rausu is an indigenous Ainu word roughly translated as 'Place of men with beast-like spirit.'

Rausu is also the biggest town on the eastern side of the Shiretoko Peninsula, a pristine UNESCO World Heritage Site and shard of wilderness whose name means 'End of the Earth.'

Known for its rich wildlife and marine ecosystems, this peninsula also hosts one of the densest populations of brown bears in the world (although currently all in hibernation) and benefits from winter sea ice that supports a hugely diverse marine, bird, and mammal life.

Of particular interest to us, the region is also a sanctuary for the majestic Blakiston's Fish Owl, known locally as 'Shima-fukuro.'

Not only is the Blakiston's the world's largest owl, it's one of the most endangered, facing critical threats due to habitat loss from logging in old-growth forests. With fewer than 800 pairs believed to remain in the wild, a small Rausu guesthouse – Washi No Yado – is renowned as probably the best place in the world to see these owls. Here, owners contribute to their survival by providing frozen fish in snowy pools during winter.

We swiftly checked into our hotel, enjoying an early dinner, before arriving at Washi No Yado before 5 pm.

The prime viewing spot for observing the owl is a long-windowed restaurant overlooking the snowy riverbank. The fishing pond itself is illuminated by strobe lights, necessitating specific camera settings: a shutter speed of 1/80, aperture of 5.6, and ISO 3200, to capture the owl as it swoops in. Get it right, and you will surely have at least a few sharp images. Get it wrong, and you risk banding, a huge amount of noise or rendering the owl as just a blur of colour.

The guesthouse logbook had recorded nocturnal owl visits at approximately 8.15pm, 1.10am, 1.15am and 4.50 am the previous night – which made us hopeful for a relatively early sighting.

Although it's important to remember that these are wild birds and some nights the owls don't turn up at all.

Washi No Yado now has three owls that regularly appear, a male, female and juvenile (their owlet, now approximately two years old.)

We were lucky to experience our first owl sighting at just 7.35pm. The juvenile – now almost fully grown – swooped in and alighted on a branch, its hulking silhouette still a remarkable sight.

Within a blink, it was sat on the bankside. Just a few seconds later, it swooped into the snow hole, before swooping out again, grasping a fish, and with saucer-like eyes and expansive wings. We held our breath as it paused, fish in claw, before vanishing into the night.

Less than two hours minutes later, the older male owl did the same, perching for two minutes before seizing another fish. Blakiston's Fish Owls really do make for a staggering sight; you could almost hear the whooshing of this adult's vast wings as he tried to generate enough uplift to exit the snowy pond.

However, after being disturbed by noise from new photographers arriving at the guesthouse, this male retreated to a branch and remained motionless for more than an hour. We remained watching, hoping he would return to the pond. But then, in a blink, he was gone, having disappeared into the darkness.

But with all of us managing at least a few owl shots, and with tiredness setting in – as well as some annoyance at the hubbub from other photographers and guesthouse owner inside the owl viewing restaurant – we finally called it a night, and were home in our hotel by midnight.

The Wild Images tour allows for three full days in Rausu – mainly because of the temperamental behaviour of the much-desired pack ice, whose appearance off the coast of Rausu, can make for stunning eagle images.

For the first time in the years that I've guided here, the ice didn't appear – another indication of the warm seas following last year's El Niño that ushered in record temperatures.

Undeterred, we resolved to make the best of our eagle boat sessions over the next few days, deciding to concentrate on flight and action shots instead, with the boats attracting eagles close to the coastline.

The day after our owl adventure, Rausu was hit with more blizzards. Venturing out, we spent some time along the harbourside at a roosting spot beloved by both Steller's Sea and White-tailed Eagles. Watching these vast birds soar in was a warm-up for what was to come.

Stopping briefly back at Washi No Yado, we photographed a pair of Brown Dippers and enjoyed a leisurely lunch at a restaurant above the fish market. Finally, we explored Rausu's harbors for seabirds and ducks – with a number of gulls (Slaty-backed, Glaucous and Glaucous-winged) together with duck species Greater Scaup, Black Scoters, Red-breasted Mergansers and Pelagic Cormorants to add to our bird lists.

'The Greatest Eagle Show on Earth' – Wowed by Steller's Sea and White-tailed Eagles

For many of this year's tour members, we'd saved the best wildlife experience for last. Even photographers who don't consider themselves bird aficionados are frequently bowled over by the sight of hundreds of mighty Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed – two of the biggest eagles in the world – swooping and diving in every direction around them.

Finally, our eagle boat days arrived; our first coinciding with another morning of blizzard conditions and temperatures of -15 degrees C. We boarded our first small boat before dawn; one of around five that took to the sea that morning. Due to the lack of visibility and heavy snow, we all had to accept the voyage would be slightly delayed.

Yet as we chugged out of the harbour and to a spot just a short distance off the Rausu coast, the first eagles appeared; flying out of the snowy darkness like ghostly apparitions.

The crew tossed fish into the sea, first coaxing down the Steller's Sea Eagle. Steller's are one of the biggest eagles in the world by weight – and hugely distinctive with their hooked orange beaks and feet, heavily white-feathered legs, and bold pied colouration of dark brown / black plumage contrasting with white.

Soon, the agile White-tailed Eagle arrived, deftly outmaneuvering the Steller's in their aerial acrobatic swoops for fish. Overwhelmed by the flurry of more than 200 eagles around us, we filled our camera memory cards, despite the biting cold.

Our second boat trip that morning – just 45 minutes (and a quick 7-Eleven coffee and breakfast) later – was more productive. The worst of the snowfall subsided, allowing us to focus better on action shots, with eagles backdropped by the sea or against the snowy trees of the Rausu hills.

Other seabirds, like Slaty-backed and Glaucous Gulls, along with Japanese Cormorants, added to the spectacle.

Many of our best eagle portraits were taken on the thick snow that carpeted the top of the harbour wall. Here – thanks to the careful steering of the boat captains – we were able to get very close to the raptors, with brief skirmishes breaking out between whichever species of eagle that considered itself dominant.

After our first eagle boat trips were over, most of us felt elated. We drove back up to the Notsuke Peninsula, stopping for a hearty noodle or seafood lunch in a restaurant largely served by a cheerful robot.

Back on the peninsula, we took a stroll around some of the colourful fishing boats, laying dormant for winter, and had a lovely encounter with a very curious Ezo Fox that came almost within touching distance of us.

Although we were booked to go on our final set of eagle boat-trips the following day, a glance at the weather showed another day of heavy blizzards and limited visibility (particularly for the first morning session.) I took the decision to change the boat trips to the next day – our last morning in Rausu – in the hopes of catching a sunrise. A gamble, perhaps, but one I hoped would pay off.

With our free middle day, we headed down a long stretch of empty Hokkaido coast, stopping to photograph Whooper Swans, Black-eared Kite, Asian Rosy-Finch and a herd of Yezo Sika Deer that melted in and out of the shadows of the trees.

Lunching at Lake Furen (normally a favourite stop for me, due to its eagle and kite feeding sessions that sometimes results in fox-eagle interactions) we were disappointed to find that this lake, too, hadn't frozen this year, with no feeding sessions planned for any time soon.

The following morning, my gamble for a sunrise, on our boat trips in Rausu, paid off. We were rewarded with some spectacular golden light, with the rising sun sometimes turning both species of sea eagles' feathers – and even the sea – bright orange. Our first shots, against the sun, rendered the birds as silhouettes.

And this time, our shots against the harbour wall were backdropped by a brilliant blue sky. Not one of us didn't savour this last encounter with the majestic sea eagles.

After disembarking following our last boat trip, it was time to say goodbye to Rausu. Pressing onwards through some lovely snowy landscapes, we arrived at the most luxurious accommodation of our entire tour: the wonderful Nakashibetsu-based Yoroushi Onsen.

While some of the group headed for an onsen bath, others opted to sit in front of the lounge's giant glass windows photographing a number of birds: from Eurasian Jays to woodpeckers and finches, attracted by the hotel's bird feeders.

This spa hotel also has a reliable fishing pond and a resident Blakiston's Fish Owl – although despite some of the group staying up late – and a few (like me) getting up very early, none of us were rewarded with a sighting this year.

Following breakfast on our final morning, we slowly made our way back toward Kushiro, stopping briefly to check on the one Ural Owl that we'd missed. Hurrah! This time, we were lucky to get some shots.

Finally, we stopped, for one last time, at the Akan Crane Centre, allowing us a few last hours – and one more chance – to photograph the dancing Red-crowned Cranes.

As the light began to fade, all that was left for us was to return to Kushiro Airport, grab some dinner and to catch our flight back to Tokyo, bringing an end to an – at times – exhausting, but undeniably majestic and magical, Japanese wildlife tour.