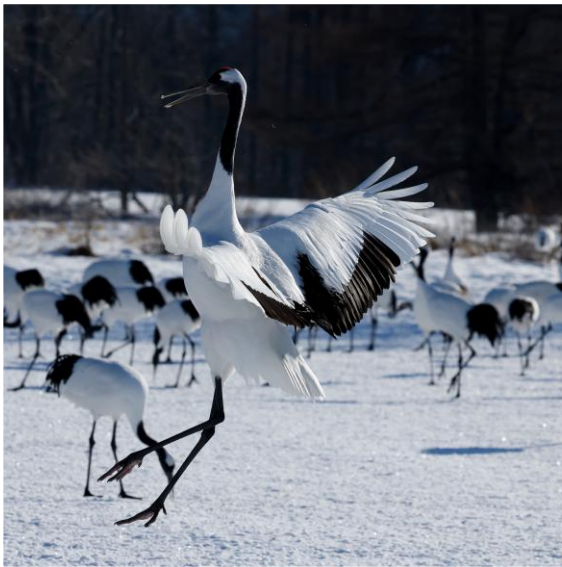


## Tour Report

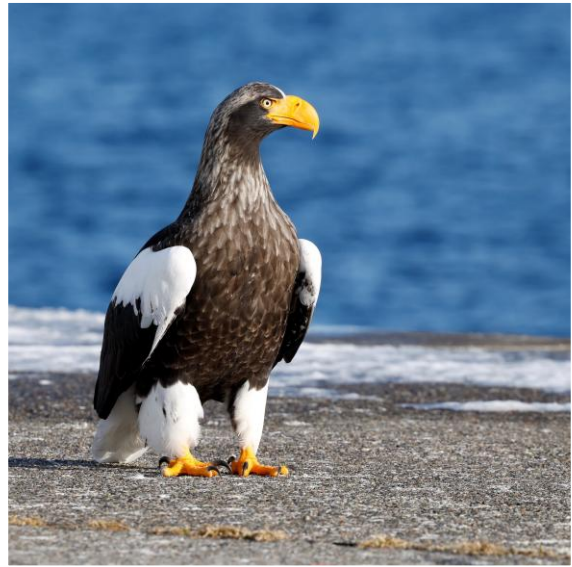
### Japan's Winter Wildlife

17 – 26 January 2026

Red-crowned crane



Steller's sea eagle



Blakiston's fish owl



Japanese macaque



Compiled by Terry Reis

**Saturday 17 January 2026**

**Day 1:**

Tokyo/Hokkaido

Five of us met in the departure lounge at Haneda Airport in Tokyo in the very early afternoon. One of us had arrived in Japan the previous day, the others somewhat earlier. On arrival in Kushiro, we met the other two tour members and the local guide, Chieko, and our Hokkaido driver, Nakata. In the airport, we changed into more suitable clothes for the conditions outside which were comparatively pleasant for the location and season, -2°C, sunny and calm. We drove a short distance to a red-crowned crane feeding site, Tsururumidai, seeing a very distant Steller's sea eagle in flight and a few sika deer during the drive. Less than 20 cranes were present, it being some time since they'd been fed. Other species seen as we observed and photographed the cranes were white-tailed eagle, one of which flew quite low over our heads, eastern buzzard, Eurasian jay, cinerous tit, large-billed crow and carrion crow.

We then drove to Otowa Bridge to see if any cranes were coming into roost but left quite quickly due to insufficient activity and a long drive ahead, most of it in darkness. We called in at a convenience store en route to our accommodation and each selected our breakfast for tomorrow. After settling in at Kawayu Daiichi Hotel Suikazura, we ate an excellent buffet Japanese dinner of remarkable variety and then retired to our rooms in preparation for an early start tomorrow.

**Sunday 18 January 2026**

**Day 2:**

Hokkaido

We left the hotel at 5.00 to be at the Otowa Bridge before dawn. This is a very popular photographic site and a section of the bridge adjacent to the vehicular bridge was built specifically for this purpose. It was -12°C but mercifully still, at least for the first hour or so.

About 50 red-crowned cranes were present some distance downstream. After a while, two flew towards us and then slowly worked their way wading in the river towards the bridge. As we waited somewhat impatiently (due to the cold) for the remainder of the cranes to fly we saw two red foxes, a sika deer, a buzzard in silhouette (probably eastern buzzard), red-breasted merganser, common merganser and carrion crow. After a couple of hours we shifted to the nearby Tsurui-Ito Crane Sanctuary, where we lined up along a fence lined with similarly-minded people and a lot of very expensive camera equipment. Slightly more than 100 cranes were present, waiting to be fed. They became much more active once the grain had been distributed. A few sika deer were seen behind the cranes, otherwise only a marsh tit and some carrion crows were observed.

The tree housing the Ural owls that would have been our next destination had reportedly fallen down so we returned to Tsururumidai, where many more cranes were present than yesterday. The birds were quite active and presented many opportunities for photos in dance, dispute and flight. Great spotted woodpecker, long-tailed tit, Eurasian tree sparrow and carrion crow were also present. Once again, a distant Steller's sea eagle was seen in flight.

We drove for lunch at a charming little restaurant, *Heart'n Tree*. The good food was further enhanced by the bird feeders outside a window, which attracted Eurasian jay, Eurasian nuthatch, cinerous tit and a seemingly endless supply of willow tit. The close proximity allowed good perusal of the features to separate the willow tit from the very similar marsh tit. After lunch to drove to two sites on Lake Kussharo. We were greeted with very light snow, a bitter wind and a solitary mallard at our first stop, which was very brief. We continued to a second site, which harboured a souvenir shop and other infrastructure. The weather remained the same, but we persisted here as there was a large gathering of whooper swans being fed by people. A few mallards surfed the waves near shore and two common mergansers were some distance offshore. Cinerous tit and Eurasian nuthatch both pecked at the substrate close to the water's edge,

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presumably for food scraps left by the swans.

We moved on to the nearby Kawayu Visitor Centre with stuffed brown bears and a variety of birds, plus many photos and information panels in Japanese. Chieko translated as required. From there we walked a trail through tall conifer forest for about 20 minutes, seeing a few sika deer. Then we returned to the hotel for some welcome down time and warmth before dinner.

**Monday 19 January 2026**

**Day 3:**  
Hokkaido

We had a late start today, leaving the hotel at 9.00 and driving a short distance to the 500-metre high volcano of Iō-san (Sulphur Mountain). Although -10°C, it was clear and still and seemed almost warm after yesterday's bitter wind. We explored the sulphur vents and somewhat alien-looking landscape for 30 minutes and then headed for Rausu on the coast. The drive was uneventful with just two red foxes and a number of crows seen. We stopped at Rausu and had a noodle lunch in a very untouristy but welcome restaurant. After lunch, we watched a number of Steller's sea eagles and white-tailed eagles perched in tall trees on the edge of town. A small flock of long-tailed tit and willow tit were seen here as well.

We were the exclusive passengers on the cruise and Chieko arranged for the duration to be extended to two hours due to an inclement forecast for tomorrow. The weather was good though it was still unsurprisingly cold on the moving boat. The light was excellent for photography. In Rausu harbour, we saw a lot of harlequin duck, a most attractive species, a few pelagic cormorants and a single female red-breasted merganser. Slaty-backed gulls were very common and a few Vega gulls were scattered among them. The sea wall sheltering the harbour was lined with Steller's sea eagles and white-tailed eagles. They allowed quite close approach, and the boat crew threw a few fish to get their attention. There was a lot of activity as the eagles competed for the fish, with the white-tailed eagles happy to physically contend with the notably larger Steller's.

We left the harbour and went in pursuit of Steller's sea lion and spotted seal along the coast. Given the lack of sea ice, killer whales and other cetacean species were also possible, if somewhat unlikely. A small flock of murrelets was seen very poorly, probably ancient or possibly long-billed murrelets. Once again, the crew threw fish to the eagles and we had excellent opportunities for observing and photographing the birds in flight. We returned to the harbour to see more harlequin ducks and pelagic cormorants and added a female mallard and four male common goldeneyes to our day list. We disembarked and drove the short distance to Hotel Minenoyu where we had an hour to prepare for our time at Washi no Yado fish owl observatory, departing at 16.30 for the short drive. Around 18.00 we were rewarded with very lengthy views of a Blakiston's fish owl coming in the feed on fish left for it in a stream by staff. After eating, it flew into a nearby tree and was still there when we left. We then enjoyed an excellent Japanese dinner at the hotel.

**Tuesday 20 January 2026**

**Day 4:**  
Hokkaido

The boat captain had cancelled our planned morning cruise due to the weather. Very early morning there was just light snow, but the conditions deteriorated over the next few hours and we were confined to our hotel for the morning. Drift snow piled up against the hotel and visibility was very poor with swirling winds. We took advantage of this unplanned downtime to have a very leisurely and enjoyable late breakfast. At noon, Nakata declared it was safe to go to lunch and so we wandered through the snow to the vehicle and drove into a very white landscape. Any proper field time was impossible, so we enjoyed another very leisurely meal. Upon completion, we went to the harbour to look for waterfowl and other species sheltering from the inclement weather. This was Chieko's idea and it was a good one. Although we only added tufted duck to our trip tally the harbour also held harlequin duck, common merganser, red-breasted merganser

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and common goldeneye. A large number of slaty-backed gulls were present and among them was a likely glaucous-winged gull. But distance and the continuing snowfall meant we were uncertain about the latter.

We returned to the hotel for an enforced break and at 16.30 most of us returned to the owl observatory. It was still lightly snowing. It had snowed all day. A Blakiston's fish owl turned up quite quickly, fed after a short while and flew off. Not long after, an owl landed in a nearby tree, having come from the opposite direction. It eventually flew down to the stream, collected a fish and then spent a long time sitting on the ground looking around as if suspiciously. It flew off when a car arrived. The observatory owner said it was a different individual. Happy with our observations, we returned to the hotel somewhat early for dinner.

## Wednesday 21 January 2026

### Day 5:

Hokkaido

We awoke to much better conditions. Chieko had arranged an unscheduled one-hour boat trip for this morning, though confined to within the sea wall. After breakfast, some of us drove down to the boat, others chose time off. The 7.00 cruise was very successful with very close views of Steller's sea eagles and white-tailed eagles. The harbour held the usual harlequin duck, slaty-backed gull and pelagic cormorant. When we arrived at the sea wall no eagle was present but within a few minutes of the first fish cast by the crew they arrived. The wall and the air around the boat filled with both Steller's sea eagles and white-tailed eagles. The smaller white-tailed eagles are more aggressive than the Steller's and would indulge in heavy contact with the larger species to win a thrown fish. Both species, but especially the white-tails, allowed very close approach by our boat. The light snow made for some very atmospheric photos.

We returned to the hotel and, with the others, we left at 9.30 and drove south to the Shiretoko Peninsula. We stopped at an information centre south of the town of Shibetsu and then continued on to the end of the road, whereupon we walked a short distance through the snow to a lighthouse. Black scoter, ancient murrelet, glaucous gull, red fox, common merganser and harlequin duck were seen. Sika deer were very common and were very cooperative photographic subjects.

We drove back north to Shibetsu and had lunch at a restaurant at 13.00. We were unable to check into our hotel until 15.00 so we returned to the peninsula to search for short-eared owl and other species. Quite quickly an owl was seen flying parallel to the road, perching occasionally on the ground or on posts. Some of us pursued it on foot for photographs and we were joined by several other people who were driving by. Also seen were a black (black-eared) kite and a flock of snow buntings. Though the latter weren't seen by all of us and the views were poor. We continued to Yuyado Daiichi Hotel at Yoroushi, seeing two pairs of red-crowned cranes en route. Once checked in, some of us saw a Japanese pygmy woodpecker at a bird feeder. Willow tit was also present.

We retired after a typically excellent Japanese dinner. Some of us responded to the phone call just after 21.00, advising of the presence of a Blakiston's fish owl at the feeding station just outside a window visible from the lounge room and one of the dining rooms. The glass hinders photography but the very close views of this huge and endangered owl are wonderful.

## Thursday 22 January 2026

### Day 6:

Hokkaido/Tokyo

The tour itinerary included a visit today to Lake Furen where fish are thrown onto the frozen lake for large numbers of eagles and black kites. Unfortunately, Chieko had been advised that the lake was not frozen and the photographic opportunity wasn't available. So we chose to stay at the hotel and watch whatever came into the feeders just outside the windows. Two Eurasian red squirrels in their winter coat and with seasonally longer ear tufts spent a lengthy time feeding on sunflowers and were joined at the feeders by

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Eurasian jay, great spotted woodpecker, willow tit, cinerous tit and Eurasian nuthatch. A Eurasian wren was seen by two of us. At least two brown dippers foraged along the stream and a crested kingfisher was simply a black and white blur as it flew upstream. A white-tailed eagle and a large-billed crow perched in the trees along the stream. Light snow fell in the morning but generally, conditions were good.

At 11.00 we left the hotel. Our first stop was a convenience store for each person to buy lunch. We then continued to a known roost site for Ural owl but failed to find it. While there a local person drove up and told Chieko there was another site not far down the road. He took us there but again we failed to see the bird. We continued towards Kushiro airport, traversing a national park and driving over Otowa Bridge. Species seen included Steller's sea eagle, white-tailed eagle, red-crowned crane and, as usual, many sika deer. Our final stop before the airport was yet another Ural owl roost site, right next to the airport perimeter fence. But we were no more successful here. We said goodbye to Chieko and the Nakata and flew to Haneda Airport. We were met by Toshi, a local guide, and caught taxis to Shinagawa Prince Hotel.

**Friday 23 January 2026**

**Day 7:**  
Honshu

We met Toshi in the hotel lobby at 8.45 and he escorted us across the road to the train station. We caught a local train to the platform for the bullet train (shinkansen) to Nagano, which left at 10.00. Upon arrival in Nagano we were met by our driver. The drive to Yamanouchi was broken by a short stop in an area of traditional buildings where we investigated a few shops. We continued on to the Hotel Tsubakino, arriving at 13.30. The weather was cool but calm and sunny. After checking in, three of us received instructions from Toshi on how to get to and from the Japanese macaque hot spring site, Jigokudani, and departed in a taxi just after 14.00. This was a non-itinerary excursion. The rest of us explored the town or stayed in the hotel. The trio returned triumphant from their macaque expedition and we all met for another Japanese multi-course dinner.

**Saturday 24 January 2026**

**Day 8:**  
Honshu

We were taken by two taxis to the entrance to Jigokudani at 8.30. Conditions were comparatively warm, though the cloud cover and weather forecast promised snow. The group dispersed during the 1.6 km walk to the park gate due to different walking paces. No birds were seen during the walk, which replicated the experience of the trio yesterday. After passing through the park gate we all saw many Japanese macaques. Most were using the habitats surrounding the actual hot spring though a number of females and juveniles were bathing or sitting on the edge of the spring. The photographers among us jostled with the crowd for suitable positions for photography but given the length of our stay, we all had excellent views of the animals bathing and those elsewhere. The macaques are largely oblivious of humans. Weaving their way through the crowd. A Japanese serow was seen feeding on a slope above the hot springs. This animal gave prolonged views and appeared unconcerned by the presence of so many people. The species is a so-called goat-antelope and is a national symbol of Japan.

We left at differing times with most of us experiencing light snowfall as we walked back. All of us walked the approximate two km from the hot springs to a bus station where we caught a bus to near the hotel. A hawkfinch was seen by some of us while waiting for the bus. Mid-afternoon three of us went for a walk along the river. Japanese wagtail, dusky thrush, brambling, meadow bunting, Japanese pygmy woodpecker, Eurasian teal, eastern spot-billed duck, brown dipper, grey wagtail, oriental greenfinch, brown-eared bulbul and some other regularly recorded bird species were seen.

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**Sunday 25 January 2026**

**Day 9:**  
Honshu

We awoke to snow blanketing the landscape and still falling. A local guide, Fumiko, and driver arrived at 9.00. The snowfall was reasonably heavy throughout our drive. We stopped at the temple of Zenko-ji and Fumiko guided us through the substantial grounds for an hour, explaining the history of the temple and the activities of many of the other visitors. We then scattered to enjoy another two hours of free time. The immediate surrounds of the temple contain many places to eat and various shops. It snowed throughout our stay, which made for very picturesque scenery. Partly because of the conditions, we saw very few birds, white wagtail and brown-eared bulbul being the only species worth noting. Just before 13.00 we drove to the train station and caught the bullet train back to Tokyo. Snow ceased to fall as we headed towards Tokyo and there was no snow on the ground for much of the journey. Toshi met us at the train station, escorted us onto a train to the station across the road to the hotel and we checked back in and collected our stored luggage. One of the group said their goodbyes in the hotel lobby. The rest of us were staying the night.

**Monday 26 January 2026**

**Day 10:**  
Tokyo

Three of us flew home today, two to England and one to Australia. The other three extended their stay in Japan.

The tour was very successful, despite some interference by the weather. We had excellent views and good photographic opportunities for our five major target species: red-crowned crane, Steller's sea eagle, white-tailed eagle, Blakiston's fish owl and Japanese macaque. The macaques obliged by bathing in the hot springs. The strange-looking Japanese serow was a bonus species. The Japanese food was wonderful, especially at the four traditional-style hotels at which we stayed. And, as always, the Japanese people were charming.

#### **Suggested reading:**

Brazil, M (2018), *Birds of Japan*, Helm Field Guides, Bloomsbury.

Brazil, M (2022), *Japan: the natural history of an Asian archipelago*, Princeton University Press.

Chikara, O (2019), *Birds of Japan*, Lynx Edicions.

Ohdachi, SD, Ishibashi, Y, Iwasa, MA & Saitoh, T (eds) (2009), *The wild mammals of Japan*, Shoukadoh & Mammalogical Society of Japan.

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# Checklist for Japan's Winter Wildlife



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9
	<b>BIRDS</b>										
1	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓			✓	✓			
2	Harlequin duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>			✓	✓	✓				
3	Black scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</i>					✓				
4	Common goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>			✓	✓					
5	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓	✓					
6	Common merganser (goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		✓		✓	✓				
7	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>				✓					
8	Eastern spot-billed duck	<i>Anas zonorhyncha</i>							✓	✓	
9	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓	✓				✓	✓	
10	Green-winged (Eurasian) teal	<i>Anas crecca crecca</i>								✓	
11	Rock dove	<i>Columba livia</i>							✓	✓	✓
12	Red-crowned crane	<i>Grus japonensis</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓			
13	Ancient murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus antiquus</i>					✓				
14	Vega gull	<i>Larus vegae</i>			✓	✓					
15	Glaucous gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>			✓		✓				
16	Slaty-backed gull	<i>Larus schistisagus</i>			✓	✓	✓				
17	Pelagic cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>			✓	✓	✓				
18	Short-eared owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>					✓				
19	Blakiston's fish owl	<i>Bubo blakistoni</i>			✓	✓					
20	Black (Black-eared) kite	<i>Milvus migrans lineatus</i>					✓		✓		
21	Steller's sea eagle	<i>Haliaeetus pelagicus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
22	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			
23	Eastern buzzard	<i>Buteo japonicus</i>	✓	✓							
24	Crested kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle lugubris</i>						✓			
25	Japanese pygmy woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos kizuki</i>					✓			✓	
26	Great-spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓				✓			

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27	Bull-headed Shrike	<i>Lanius bucephalus</i>							✓		
28	Eurasian jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	✓	✓						✓	
29	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
30	Large-billed (Northern jungle) crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos japonensis</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓			
31	Cinereous (Japanese) tit	<i>Parus cinereus minor</i>	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	
32	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>		✓							
33	Willow tit	<i>Poecile montanus</i>		✓	✓		✓	✓			
34	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aethithalos caudatus</i>			✓		✓		✓	✓	
35	Brown-eared bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes amaurotis</i>							✓	✓	✓
36	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>		✓				✓			
37	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>						✓			
38	White-cheeked starling	<i>Spodiopsar cineraceus</i>							✓	✓	
39	Brown dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>						✓	✓	✓	
40	Dusky thrush	<i>Turdus eunomus</i>								✓	
41	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>		✓					✓	✓	✓
42	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>								✓	
43	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>							✓	✓	✓
44	Japanese wagtail	<i>Motacilla grandis</i>								✓	
45	Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>								✓	
46	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>						✓		✓	
47	Oriental greenfinch	<i>Chloris sinica</i>							✓	✓	
48	Snow bunting	<i>Plectrophenax nivalis</i>					✓				
49	Meadow bunting	<i>Emberiza cioides</i>							✓	✓	
	<b>MAMMALS</b>										
1	Japanese macaque	<i>Macaca fuscata</i>							✓	✓	
2	Eurasian red squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>						✓			
3	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		✓	✓		✓				
4	Sika deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			
5	Japanese serow	<i>Capricornis crispus</i>								✓	