WILDLIFE WORLDWIDE
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Tour Report
Japan's Winter Wildlife – A Photography Special
3 – 13 February 2026

White-tailed eagle



Sika deer



Snow monkey



Stellar's sea eagle



Compiled by Sean Weekly

Tuesday 3 February 2026

Day 1
London Heathrow to Tokyo Haneda Airport

Day one kicked off bright and early with a very early morning start at Heathrow Airport. Bleary eyes, coffees in hand, and plenty of excitement in the air as we prepared for our 08:35 departure to Tokyo. With a long 13.5-hour flight ahead of us, spirits were surprisingly high, the adventure was officially underway!

Before boarding, I had the chance to meet a couple of our guests at the gate. They were absolutely lovely, full of energy, and clearly buzzing with excitement about heading to Japan. It was great to start the trip with such a positive vibe and get chatting about what everyone was most looking forward to over the next couple of weeks.

Boarding was smooth and right on schedule, and I'm happy to report that the flight left on time — always a great start! The journey itself was calm and comfortable, making the long haul far more manageable. Plenty of time to settle in, watch a few films, grab some food, and try to get a bit of rest before landing on the other side of the world.

As we cruised towards Tokyo, anticipation continued to build. The plan was to meet the rest of the group upon arrival, and excitement was definitely growing about finally being in Japan and kicking off the tour properly.

A long travel day, but a smooth and positive start to what promises to be an amazing adventure

Wednesday 4 February 2026

Day 2
Arrival in Hokkaido | First Wildlife Encounters

After a very long journey and the inevitable time difference, it's fair to say everyone was feeling a little tired today, but that certainly didn't dampen the excitement. Adrenaline and anticipation were doing a great job of keeping spirits high as we officially arrived in Japan and began the first proper day of the tour.

We were met at Kushiro Airport by our absolutely amazing guide, Chieko, also known (affectionately) as *my Japanese mother*. Honestly, she is one of the best tour guides you could ever ask for, and we're incredibly lucky to work with her year in, year out. As always, she greeted us with a huge smile and instantly made everyone feel welcome and at ease.

Once we'd loaded up the bus, we were officially on the road and heading towards our hotel. The drive was around 70 minutes, but of course, this wasn't going to be a straight run without a little wildlife adventure along the way.

Our original plan was to make a brief stop at Tsurumidai, an area known for its red-crowned cranes. As expected, there were some excellent numbers around, and it was great to get our first glimpse of these iconic birds. However, with daylight already starting to fade, we made the decision not to stop so we could prioritise better light later on for the swans closer to the hotel.

We continued on and passed by Lake Kushiro, where we stopped briefly to check out the swans. We had a great little session with the swans in the short time that we had, they were enjoying the warm thermals of the caldera lake. With the cold air temperatures, it produced some nice steam on the water, which was good fun trying to get a shot with the swans amongst the stream. Always a challenge but fun. With the light gone and temperatures dropping fast, we decided not to stay and photograph any longer, opting instead to press on and get everyone settled after such a long travel day.







Despite the cold and fatigue, it was still a great first taste of Hokkaido, wildlife already showing itself, snow underfoot, and that unmistakable feeling that the adventure is truly underway. We checked into our beautiful traditional Japanese hotel, Kawayu Daiichi Hotel Suikazura, which would be our home for the first couple of nights in Japan. The hotel is absolutely gorgeous and couldn't have been more perfect after a long travel day, warm, welcoming, and full of traditional charm.

A hot meal, cosy surroundings, and the chance to finally relax were very much appreciated by everyone. We enjoyed a delicious buffet-style dinner, giving guests their first proper taste of Japanese cuisine, exactly what was needed after such a long journey.

After dinner, Chieko kindly ran through onsen etiquette for anyone planning to make use of the hot springs. As always, she explained everything clearly and with a smile, helping guests feel comfortable and confident about the experience.

With full bellies, warm rooms, and exhaustion finally catching up with us, it was then straight to bed for most, hoping to shake off the jet lag and recharge ahead of our first full day out in the field.

Thursday 5 February 2026

Day 3
Red-crowned Cranes & Swan Spectacle

This morning came very early, with a 5:00 am meet-up in the hotel lobby. Despite the short night and lingering jet lag, everyone was up and moving, helped massively by the fact that Chieko had very kindly brought coffee for us to enjoy on the bus. A small gesture, but an absolute lifesaver at that hour!

Our destination for sunrise was Otowa Bridge, one of the most famous locations in Japan to see and photograph the Japanese red-crowned crane. These incredible birds roost downstream on the thermal waters, creating a truly atmospheric winter scene.

The journey took around 1.5 hours, and we needed to leave early to ensure we arrived in plenty of time for sunrise. The drive itself was relaxed and quiet; everyone was still a little sleepy, but with that underlying buzz of excitement that comes with knowing a full day of photography lay ahead.

We eventually arrived and set ourselves up on the bridge as the sky began to brighten. It was cold, sitting at around –7°C — chilly, but by no means the coldest this location can throw at you. As the light slowly improved, the cranes began to wake up, becoming more active as the sun started to rise.

Conditions were a little challenging this morning. The cranes were quite bunched together, and the sunrise colours didn't quite put on their best performance. That said, everyone adapted well, made the most of the situation, and still came away with some really lovely images.



As the light started to become too harsh, we wrapped things up and headed off, stopping at a service station en route for a much-needed coffee break before our next session.

From there, we continued on to the Tsurui-Ito Crane Sanctuary, timing our arrival perfectly to coincide with

the morning feeding.

Although the cranes are completely wild, feeding sites like this have been set up across the island where volunteer staff lay out grain during winter. This helps supplement the birds' natural food sources, reduces conflict with local farmers, and plays a crucial role in conservation, especially important given that the Japanese red-crowned crane is considered one of the rarest crane species in the world.

Feeding sites such as this offer the best opportunities for photography, and we had plenty of time as cranes steadily arrived to feed. We were also treated to something extra special, the cranes' beautifully choreographed courtship rituals, where pairs appear to dance together in the snow.

The elegance of these birds, their unique behaviour, and the stunning winter habitat make them incredibly photogenic. With bright sunshine and clean backgrounds, the conditions were perfect for high-key imagery, and everyone made excellent use of the light.

Eventually, our session here came to an end, and we headed to a local restaurant for lunch, giving everyone a chance to warm up, refuel, and review images from the morning.

After lunch, we continued our crane photography and revisited Tsurumidai, another well-known area for red-crowned cranes. This time, the focus was on portrait work, allowing everyone to slow things down and really concentrate on capturing the character and detail of these stunning birds.





With another successful session completed, we hopped back onto the bus for the 1.5-hour journey to Lake Kushiro, where we planned to spend the afternoon with the whooper swans.

Our first stop was Kotan Onsen, where large numbers of swans gather to enjoy the warm thermal waters. The steam rising from the lake created a fantastic atmosphere, and it was great fun photographing the birds moving in and out of the mist.

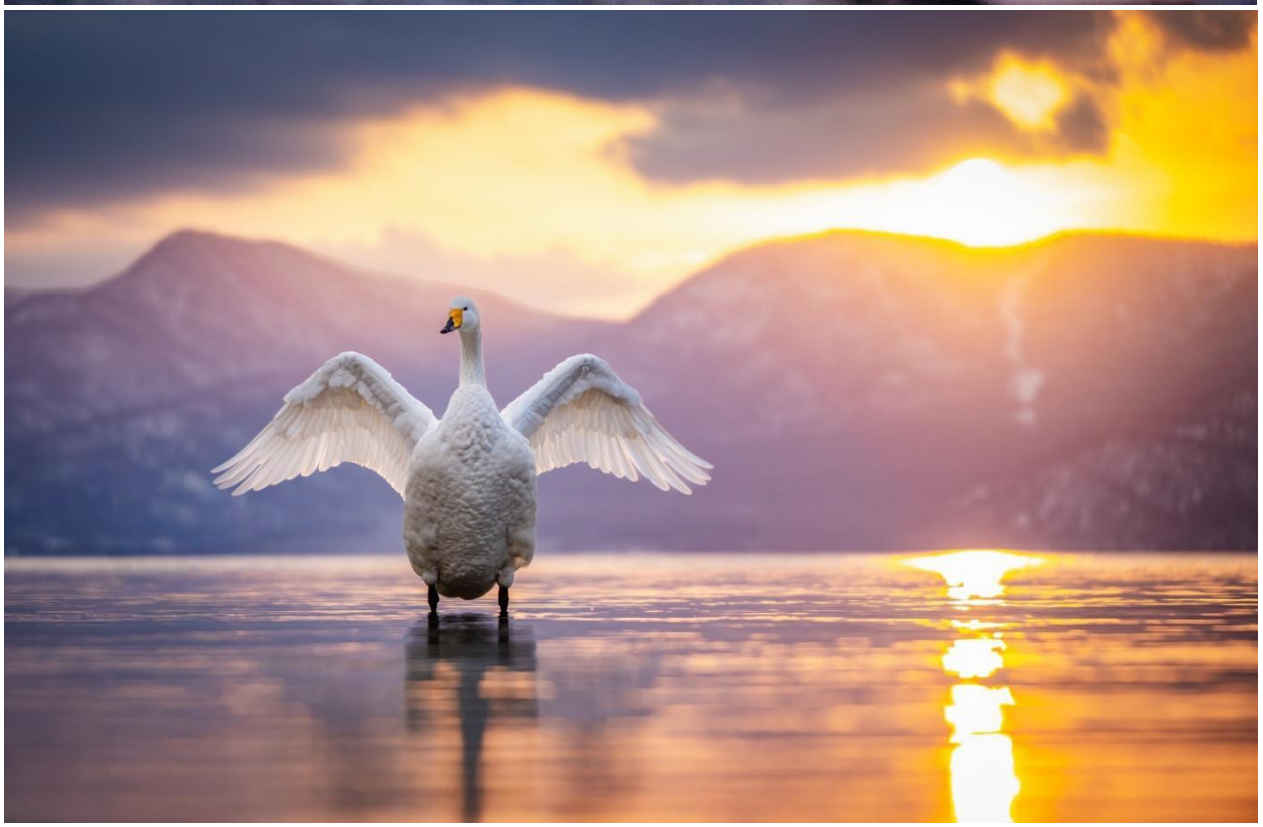




We then pushed on to the main group of swans, and were rewarded with an incredible session, lots of flying, beautiful behaviour, and stunning light to finish the day on a real high. There were also lots of Sika deer in the woods that we turned our attention to in between the swan photography.

After an action-packed day, we returned to the hotel, enjoyed dinner, and opted for a well-earned early night. Full memory cards, tired legs, and very happy guests, an outstanding Day 3 from start to finish.





Friday 6 February 2026

Day 4
Volcanoes, Eagles & Night-time Giants

After the intensity of jet lag and multiple early starts, this morning came as a very welcome slightly later start. Everyone was grateful for a little extra rest, and we began the day by enjoying another buffet breakfast at the hotel before checking out and loading up the bus.

Our first stop of the day took us into Akan National Park to visit Mount Io.

Mount Io is one of Hokkaido's most active volcanic mountains, named after the sulphur (*"io"* in Japanese) that has been mined here since the late 1800s. The area is famous for its dramatic fumaroles, where volcanic gases escape through the ground, creating billowing steam vents and vibrant mineral-stained landscapes. It's a powerful reminder that Japan is very much a living, breathing geological environment.



It was fantastic to wander through this surreal setting, surrounded by blowing steam vents, snow-covered ground, and the unmistakable smell of sulphur hanging in the air. A completely different photographic and sensory experience from the wildlife encounters so far. Reluctantly, we had to move on and begin the journey towards Rausu, which was around a 2.5-hour drive away. The journey itself was anything but dull, with stunning winter scenery rolling past the windows, and to top it off, we had a few eagle sightings along the way, which sent excitement levels soaring and built anticipation for what was still to come.

On arrival in Rausu, we stopped for a lovely lunch, perched above a favourite local seafood shop, the perfect way to refuel before the afternoon's main event.

After lunch, it was time for our eagle boat trip… and what a trip it turned out to be.

Some of the pack ice had finally drifted down into the harbour area, a hugely important and exciting development. The pack ice originates in the Sea of Okhotsk, forming off the coast of Siberia before slowly drifting south. This ice plays a vital role in the marine ecosystem, transporting nutrients that fuel plankton growth, which in turn supports fish populations and the wider food chain.

For eagles, this means opportunity. The ice provides resting platforms, feeding sites, and access to fish near the surface, making Rausu one of the best places in the world to photograph Steller's sea eagles and white-tailed sea eagles.

We were completely surrounded by tens of dozens of eagles, perched on the ice and constantly taking flight as they searched for the best vantage points. At times, birds passed just metres from the boat, allowing for incredibly tight, full-frame images, one of those moments photographers dream about.







The boat session finished near the harbour wall, where conditions were perfect for capturing eye-level

shots, giving everyone the chance to work on powerful, intimate compositions.

Still buzzing from the experience, we headed back to our hotel to check in before heading out again, this time for something truly special.







That evening, we visited a site to look for the elusive Blakiston's fish owl. Once inside the hide and fully set up, we settled in… and within one hour, we had a sighting. Incredible luck!



The owl put on a great show, and everyone walked away with fantastic images, a real highlight and a rare privilege to witness one of the world's largest and most impressive owl species in the wild.

After a few hours, it was time to head back to the hotel for dinner and some very well-earned sleep. A long, varied, and unforgettable day, volcanoes, pack ice, eagles, and owls all in one.

Saturday 7 February 2026

Day 5
Snow, Geysers & Epic Eagles

It was another early start this morning, and after rolling out of bed, we enjoyed a Japanese-style buffet breakfast at the hotel, a solid way to fuel up for whatever the day might throw at us.

We were due to head out on a morning boat trip, but first we had to wait to hear from the captain. Severe weather overnight meant conditions were looking a little sketchy, and after waiting a short while, the call came through. Unfortunately, the trip was cancelled. Not to worry though… Plan B was quickly put into action.

We headed instead to the Shiretoko National Park area and stopped at the Shiretoko Visitor Centre. Perfect timing too, it was their 60th anniversary, which meant we were lucky enough to get free snowshoe hire.

That was all the encouragement we needed to strap them on and head out into the deep snow. The walk itself was great fun, lots of laughter, plenty of sinking into fresh powder, and stunning snowy scenery all around as we made our way to a local geyser.

We waited around 30 minutes, and patience paid off. We were lucky enough to see the geyser erupt, sending

steam and hot water into the freezing air. A brilliant little winter adventure and a fantastic way to turn a



weather disruption into something memorable.

With appetites well and truly worked up, we headed to a local restaurant for lunch, where the dish of the day was laksa noodle soup. It went down as an absolute treat, warming, hearty, and exactly what we needed after being out in the snow.

In the afternoon, we were back on the water for our second eagle boat trip of the day. Although there was no pack ice, what followed was nothing short of unbelievable.

The eagles were incredibly active around the harbour wall, giving us endless opportunities for photography. There were stunning flight shots, beautifully detailed portraits, and fantastic chances for high-key imagery, with the bright winter sky creating clean, minimalist backgrounds that really made the birds stand out.

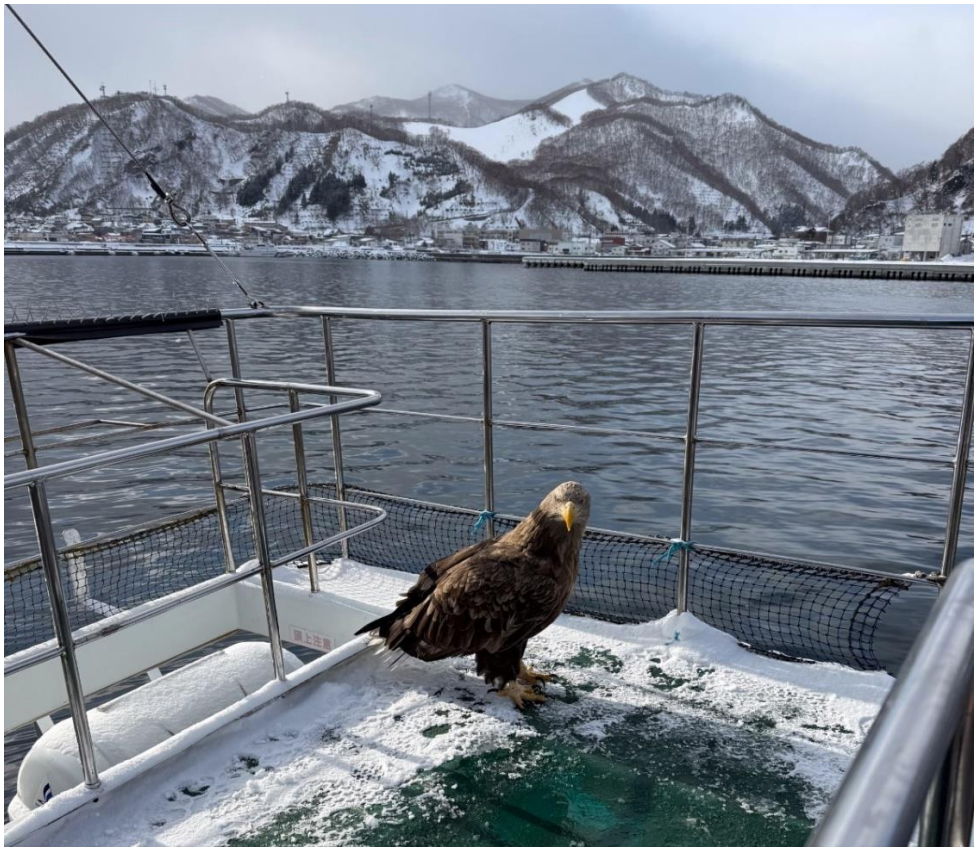








At one particularly memorable moment, one of the eagles flew directly onto the boat, completely taking one guest by surprise as the bird's wing brushed across her head! A brief shock, followed very quickly by laughter and disbelief, definitely one of those *"only in Rausu"* moments that will be talked about for years.



As evening approached, we headed out once more to the Blakiston's fish owl hide, hopeful for a repeat of our incredible luck from the previous night. Sadly, this time the owl decided not to show, reminding us that wildlife is always on its own schedule.

Despite the no-show, it had still been a fantastic day, full of adaptability, snow-filled adventures, outstanding eagle photography, and plenty of memorable moments.

We headed back to the hotel for dinner and rest, ready for whatever Day 6 had in store for us.

Sunday 8 February 2026

Day 6
"Pack Ice, Eagles & One Very Comfortable Bed.

This morning began with a very early alarm call. We met in the hotel lobby at 5:00 am, and it's fair to say jet lag was still very much making its presence known. Personally, after only three hours of sleep and a 4:30 am alarm, it was a tough one. At the time, none of us quite realised that we were about to experience a photography paradise.

It was our final morning in Rausu and our last eagle boat trip, and after the strong storms the day before, there were promising reports that more pack ice had pushed through the Nemuro Strait overnight.

Once down at the harbour, we boarded the boat and headed out into what was a bitterly cold morning. On the water, the *feels-like* temperature was hovering around –15°C, and gloves were absolutely essential. Once everyone was safely on board, we left the harbour and pushed north toward the Shiretoko Peninsula.

Around 20 minutes into the journey, it happened, that moment every photographer hopes for but never dares to expect.

There it was… pack ice. And not just a little vast, dense pack ice stretching as far as the eye could see. Combine that with huge numbers of eagles and the stunning snowy backdrop of the Shiretoko Mountain Range, and we were left completely speechless. A truly jaw-dropping scene.



As if the scene itself wasn't already outrageous enough, this turned out to be the best pack ice I have seen in Hokkaido, dense, sculpted, stretching endlessly across the sea, with eagles dotted everywhere and the Shiretoko mountains glowing behind it. One of those mornings that sets an impossibly high benchmark and makes you quietly wonder how anything could ever top it.

That said… not *everyone* got to experience it.

One guest, sadly, missed out on this absolute pack-ice perfection, having made the brave, and ultimately devastating, decision that his bed was simply too comfortable to abandon for a 04:30 am alarm. While the rest of us were out living the dream, photographing eagles on ice in sunrise light, he was tucked up warm and cosy. A choice that will no doubt haunt him every time pack ice is mentioned for the rest of his days.

As the sun rose, it gently layered the sky with soft pinks and warm oranges, creating absolutely perfect light. eagles perched on the ice, others taking flight across the frame. Conditions couldn't have been better. We focused heavily on flight shots and portraits, taking full advantage of the soft, flattering sunrise light.





Once the sun was fully up, our attention shifted slightly back toward the landscape, blending wildlife and environment. Eagles perched on glass-like ice formations, framed by frozen textures and dramatic snowy mountains, it was the kind of scene you imagine when planning a trip like this, but rarely actually get.



It honestly felt like a dream come true. One of those mornings where time disappears, memory cards fill fast, and nobody wants it to end.

Cold, exhausted, and completely exhilarated, this was Rausu at its absolute best, and the perfect way to close out our time here.









After an utterly mind-blowing morning on the boat, we headed back to the hotel to do all the sensible things, warm up properly, pack bags, and thaw out under a hot shower. Salt spray, freezing air, and hours of shooting had well and truly set in by this point, so the brief pause was very welcome.

Once checked out, we loaded back onto the bus and set off toward our next location: Notsuke Peninsula.

Notsuke is a long, narrow sand spit stretching out into the sea, known for its wild, open feel and incredible winter atmosphere. It's one of those places that feels remote and slightly forgotten, windswept, quiet, and full of photographic potential. Skeletal trees, frozen shorelines, abandoned structures, and wide skies make it a fantastic location for both wildlife watching and environmental imagery.

The plan here was simple: slow down, explore, and see what we could find. We kept our eyes peeled for birdlife, sika deer, and hopefully a red fox if luck was on our side.

There was certainly plenty of birdlife around, especially out on the water. We spotted a nice selection of species, including Harlequin ducks, black scoters, and red-breasted mergansers, but most were distant, so rather than pulling cameras out, we enjoyed taking a few moments to simply watch and appreciate them as part of the wider winter scene. Sometimes it's nice to just observe without shooting, and it adds to the relaxed feel of the stop.

Before long, our attention was drawn inland to a bachelor herd of sika deer, moving quietly through a local abandoned fishing village. Weathered buildings, snow-covered ground, and a feeling of quiet abandonment created an incredible setting, and as if scripted, the deer began to move through an open clearing.

As they walked, the scene opened up beautifully, revealing the snowy peaks of the Shiretoko Mountain Range in the distance. It was one of those moments where everyone instinctively drops lower, slows down, and starts thinking composition first. The mountains were a must!

The deer were very relaxed and completely at ease in their surroundings. Stags moved through the snow framed perfectly by the landscape. The images coming out of this session were genuinely breathtaking, the kind that doesn't happen very often. Taking animals in their environment photos to the next level.



What made it even better was the commitment from everyone. People were kneeling, crouching, and lying flat in the snow, happily getting soaked, cold, and uncomfortable just to gain a few extra inches of height difference for a stronger angle and composition. Snow worked its way into sleeves and boots, one guest almost lost her trousers from pulling off some rather interesting yoga-style photography positions, but no one cared as the moment was magical.

It genuinely felt like everything was falling into place, the setting and animals finally all working together. This is the kind of photography I love most, where you're free to move, free to choose your backgrounds and foregrounds, and able to build compositions slowly and deliberately in pursuit of that one truly special image!





Days like this don't happen often. You can plan endlessly, scout locations, and check weather forecasts… but sometimes, you simply just get a bit lucky. And today was one of those rare days where it felt like every stop delivered something special.

Tired, cold, and absolutely buzzing, this morning was winter wildlife photography at its best!

After our brilliant wander around Notsuke Peninsula and those special encounters with the sika deer weaving their way through the abandoned fishing village, it was finally time to warm up and refuel.



We headed off for a traditional lunch, which was very welcome at this point, cold hands, full memory cards, and hunger all kicking in at once.

Post-lunch, it was back on the bus and onwards to our final hotel in Hokkaido. Hard to believe that this leg of the trip was already coming to an end; it genuinely felt like we'd only just arrived, yet somehow also packed about a week's worth of experiences into a couple of days.

Our home for the next couple of nights was Yuyado Daiichi, and honestly, this place is an absolute gem.

Yuyado Daiichi is a traditional Japanese hot spring inn, tucked away in a quiet Hokkaido valley and surrounded by forest. It feels far more like staying in someone's beautifully eccentric home than a hotel. Each room is individually styled, full of character, and designed in a traditional way that instantly makes you relax, many with peaceful wintery views looking out over the surrounding landscape.

The hotel itself is very much a destination, not just a place to sleep. There's a lovely relaxation room overlooking the forest, and both indoor and outdoor onsen hot springs, perfect for soaking away cold muscles and early alarm fatigue. This is also a fantastic area for wildlife, with regular sightings of woodland birds around the lodge, and the surrounding forests known for some truly special species.

On arrival, we wasted no time, bags dropped, rooms checked, and straight out to make the most of the last bit of daylight around the hotel grounds. The lobby area alone is a birdwatcher's dream, and we had great fun photographing a variety of species including pygmy woodpecker, great spotted woodpecker, Japanese tit, and Japanese nuthatch and squirrels, all flitting around just metres from where we stood.









Just when we thought the day couldn't possibly give us any more, luck struck again. Just before dinner, we were treated to fantastic close encounters with a Blakiston's fish owl, calm, cooperative, and incredibly impressive. A real privilege to see, and an unforgettable way to round off an already ridiculous day.

Then came dinner… and this is where things truly descended into polite chaos.

A full traditional Japanese banquet began to arrive dish after dish after dish, each one beautifully presented and clearly part of a carefully choreographed order that we, as a group of very British tourists, had absolutely no idea how to follow. There was a lot of quiet panic, whispered questions of *"Are we meant to eat this now?"*, and people very confidently eating the wrong thing at entirely the wrong time.

To make things even better, each of us had our own personal rice pot, sitting there gently steaming away. We were told, very clearly, that it needed to cook for exactly 35 minutes. Naturally, nobody dared touch it. For the next half hour, every single seat featured a group of adults staring suspiciously at their own rice pot, hands folded, resisting the overwhelming urge to lift the lid *just a little bit*.

Some guests leaned in to inspect the steam, others checked their watches like they were guarding a countdown clock. Touching the lid early felt like it might result in instant embarrassment or a stern look from the staff, neither of which any of us were prepared to risk.

Meanwhile, the food kept arriving. Every time someone sighed and said, *"Surely that's it now"*, another course appeared. Some dishes were carefully saved for later, others were enthusiastically eaten on arrival, and at least one person finished a course only to realise it probably shouldn't have been touched yet.

When the 35 minutes were finally up, lids were lifted in unison to reveal perfectly cooked, fluffy rice. By this point, most of us were already full, yet still ate it anyway, purely out of respect, tradition, and the fact we'd waited far too long not to.

By the end of the meal, we were laughing, completely overfed, mildly confused, and hugely impressed, both by the banquet and by our collective ability to keep eating long past comfort. Full bellies, aching sides, and absolutely no regrets, the perfect way to end a brilliant day before heading off for some very well-earned sleep

Monday 9 February 2026

Day 7
Relaxed Mornings, Cranes & A Fond Farewell

This morning originally had a very early plan attached to it, a visit to Lake Furen, a frozen lake known for more eagle activity. However, after a quick group discussion (and some very honest reflections), it was unanimously agreed that everyone had very much had their fill of eagles, especially after the absolute epicness we experienced in Rausu.

So instead, we voted for a far more civilised option: a later checkout and a relaxed morning enjoying the bird feeders around the hotel.

A great decision all round. Warm coffee and woodland birds coming and going, a calm way to start the day and a nice contrast to the early alarms we'd grown used to.

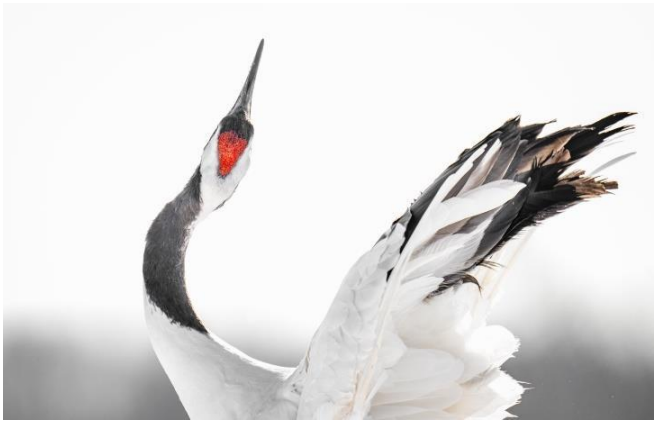
After checking out, we still had time for one last stop before leaving eastern Hokkaido, so we headed back to Tsurumidai for around an hour with the red-crowned cranes. And honestly? It was brilliant to be back.

With no pressure and familiar surroundings, we had great fun revisiting the cranes and really focusing on high-key imagery, simplifying compositions, working with light backgrounds, and slowing things right down. A lovely way to round off our time with these iconic birds.









From there, it was off to the airport for our flight back to Tokyo, and a genuinely sad farewell to our wonderful guide, Chieko. As always, she'd looked after us brilliantly and added so much warmth and humour to the trip. Saying goodbye is never easy.

Once back in Tokyo, we checked into our hotel and then headed out locally in search of something very specific: comfort food. At an Italian restaurant and a pizza later, spirits were lifted. Sometimes, a slice of carbs is exactly what's needed after days of cold weather and early starts. With full stomachs and travel fatigue catching up, it was then an early night for everyone, ready to reset and prepare for tomorrow.

A gentle end to our time in Hokkaido and the perfect transition back to city life.

Tuesday 10 February 2026

Day 8
Bullet Trains, Mountains and Snow Monkeys

We woke up this morning in Prince Shinagawa Hotel in Tokyo, and started the day in the best possible way with an enormous help-yourself buffet breakfast. And when I say enormous, I really mean it. There was absolutely everything you could want, and possibly several things you didn't know you wanted until you saw them. Delicious, dangerous, and definitely worth the extra few minutes at the table.

After breakfast, we met up with our local tour guide, who immediately became our lifeline for the day. Tokyo's public transport is incredible, but it can feel like a competitive sport if you don't know where you're going, so having expert help navigating the maze of platforms, lines, and rush-hour commuters was very much appreciated.

We jumped on the train and made our way to Tokyo Station, where things stepped up another level. From here, we boarded one of Japan's famous Shinkansen bullet trains, heading north toward Nagano.

The Shinkansen experience never gets old, sleek, silent, ridiculously punctual, and smooth enough that you can forget you're travelling at around 300 km/h. Before you've really settled into your seat, you're already watching the city blur into the countryside, mountains slowly appearing in the distance, and Tokyo life disappearing behind you. Efficient, calm, and very, very Japanese.

On arrival in Nagano, we jumped into taxis and made our way to our next hotel, a beautiful traditional Japanese ryokan tucked away in the mountains. We checked in briefly, dropped bags, got changed, and didn't hang around for long… because we had somewhere very exciting to be.

It was straight out again and off toward the snow monkeys!

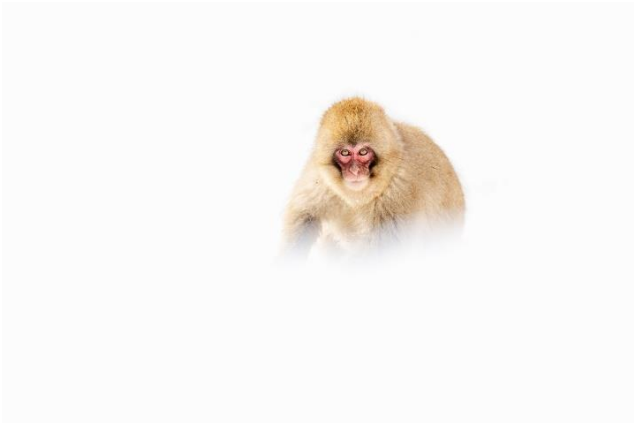
We arrived with a couple of hours to spare before closing and began the 1.6 km walk through Hell's Valley, officially known as Jigokudani. The walk itself was a lovely transition winding through forest, alongside a river, with snow underfoot and steam rising from the valley.

By this point, everyone was more than ready. Cameras were out. On arrival, it was fairly mild so the monkeys were not really in the hot springs, however, we had a great 1.5hr session with them, enjoying lots of action and photographic opportunities, concentrating on lots of portraiture.

A perfect way to end a travel-heavy day, swapping bullet trains and city platforms for snowy forests and the monkeys.







Wednesday 11 February 2026

Day 9
Snow Monkeys, Winter Magic & Creative Time

We started the day with breakfast at the hotel and not just any breakfast, but a full traditional Japanese breakfast. This involved roughly nine separate small dishes, all beautifully prepared and absolutely delicious… although slightly overwhelming first thing in the morning. Especially for someone who, back home, would usually be staring into a bowl of cereal, wondering if it counts as breakfast before 9 am. That said, everything was excellent, and everyone embraced the experience even if it did take a moment to work out what order to eat things in.

Breakfast conquered, it was then time for what we'd all been waiting for, our full day session at the snow monkeys.

And if we hadn't already used up our luck on this trip… we struck gold again.

The weather decided to play along, starting with some sleety showers. Not quite the dreamy snowfall we'd all been secretly hoping for, but honestly better than nothing. As we reached the start of the walk, the temperature dipped by just one degree, and just like that, sleet turned into proper snow. Suddenly, we were walking the 1.6km trail through a full-on winter wonderland.

The approach takes you through Jigokudani, also known as *Hell's Valley, a dramatic*, narrow gorge carved by volcanic activity. Steam rises from the river and surrounding vents, even in the depths of winter, giving the whole place a slightly eerie but magical feel. Add fresh snowfall, quiet forest paths, and frozen branches overhead, and it's hard not to slow down and soak it all in.

By the time we arrived at Jigokudani Snow Monkey Park, it was fairly busy, no surprise given the conditions. But rather than fighting the crowds, we worked with what we had. We focused on portraiture, isolating individuals, watching behaviour, and capturing moments as the monkeys moved through the falling snow.

The snowfall added so much atmosphere. Monkeys grooming, shaking snow from their fur, padding quietly through the white landscape, plenty of great behavioural moments and intimate frames, despite the number of people around.

After a fantastic morning in the park, we decided to call it around lunchtime as visitor numbers continued to climb. A good call. We treated ourselves to a well-earned coffee and a slice of local apple pie, which went down extremely well, before hopping on the bus back to the hotel.

The afternoon was deliberately slower. We enjoyed some downtime to warm up, dry out, and reset after a busy morning in the snow. Later on, I met up with the group for an editing workshop, where I walked everyone through how I process my images, from raw file to final look, explaining how I build a distinctive style and approach consistency across a body of work. A great way to wind down the day, snow monkeys in the morning, creativity in the afternoon, and no alarms quite as brutal as earlier in the trip.













Find out more about our **Japan's Winter Wildlife – A Photography Special trip or contact us**
01962 302086 sales@wildlifeworldwide.com www.wildlifeworldwide.com

Thursday 12 February 2026

Day 10
Temples, Trains & One Last Night in Tokyo

Today it was time to say goodbye to Yamanouchi and begin our journey back to Tokyo. We started the morning with another traditional Japanese breakfast; by this point, everyone felt far more confident navigating multiple small dishes before 8 am. A far cry from cereal at home. Bags were packed, rooms checked, and we met in the lobby for our shuttle down to the station.

On arrival, the station was absolutely bustling. A long line of people waited to board the incoming train, and for a moment, it felt slightly chaotic, but in that wonderfully efficient Japanese way, everything still runs perfectly on time.

Our short train ride to Nagano was smooth, and once there, we stashed our luggage in lockers before jumping into a couple of taxis bound for lunch near Zenko-ji Temple.

Lunch was fantastic, a relaxed, much-needed pause before exploring the temple complex. Zenko-ji is one of Japan's most important and historic Buddhist temples, originally built in the 7th century. The large wooden main hall, incense drifting through the air, and the steady rhythm of visitors coming and going made it a really special final cultural stop. After so much wildlife and remote scenery, it was lovely to soak up a bit of traditional Japanese heritage before heading back to the capital.



Before long, it was time to retrieve our bags and board the Shinkansen once more. As always, the bullet train delivered, smooth, fast, and almost eerily calm considering the speed. Watching the scenery blur past is something that never really gets old.

We arrived back in Tokyo right on schedule and made our way to Shinagawa, checking back into our hotel (after a brief delay) and finally reuniting with our main luggage.

That evening, I invited everyone to join me for one last Tokyo adventure, a visit to Shibuya Crossing and drinks at a rooftop bar overlooking the famous scramble. Sadly, upon arrival we discovered the bar was under refurbishment and closed, slightly disappointing, but not enough to dampen spirits.

Instead, we enjoyed a wander around Shibuya, soaking up the neon lights, the organised chaos of the crossing, and the unmistakable buzz of Tokyo at night. It was a brilliant contrast to the frozen stillness of Hokkaido earlier in the trip.





For our final dinner in Japan, we returned to a lovely Thai restaurant I've visited over the last few years. It felt fitting, a familiar place to round off the journey. The food was gorgeous, and it made for a really warm and relaxed farewell meal.

With another early morning ahead, we made our way back via the metro and enjoyed one final goodbye drink in the rooftop bar at our hotel, a quiet moment to reflect on everything we'd experienced together.

Then it was back to our rooms for our last night's sleep in Japan.

From pack ice and sea eagles to snow monkeys and neon city lights, what a journey it's been

Friday 13 February 2026

Day 11
Tokyo Haneda Airport to London Heathrow

A few of us gathered for breakfast right when the restaurant opened at 6 a.m, as our minibus to the airport was scheduled for 6:30 a.m. The journey to the airport went smoothly, and we checked in for our return flight to London without any issues. The flight departed on time and arrived at London Heathrow as scheduled. By the time we cleared immigration and made our way to baggage claim, the first suitcases were already on the carousel. Once we had collected all our luggage, we said our goodbyes and wished everyone a safe journey home.

Images by Sean Weekly

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