

## Tour Report Japan's Winter Wildlife Photography Special 9-19 January 2025

Red-crowned cranes



Blakiston's fish owl



Steller's sea eagle



Japanese macaque



Compiled by Bret Charman

**Day 1:****Thursday 9 January 2025**

London Heathrow to Tokyo

The first day of this fantastic trip in search of Japan's winter wildlife, and the exceptional photographic opportunities it offers, started with a morning flight from London Heathrow to Tokyo's Haneda International Airport. We departed on an aircraft with plenty of spare seats and the service with Japan Airlines was exceptional (as always).

**Day 2:****Friday 10 January 2025**

Tokyo to Kushiro; on to Kawayu

We arrived on time in Tokyo and were soon through immigration, picking up our bags and heading through customs. Upon exiting the arrivals area, we dropped our luggage off at the baggage transfer desk, before catching a bus to the domestic terminal. Everything went smoothly and I met the rest of the group in the departures area for our onward flight to Kushiro.

Situated on the island of Hokkaido (the northernmost island in the Japanese archipelago), Kushiro is the gateway to the eastern side of the island. We enjoyed a smooth flight and touched down in what was, for this area at least, a relatively mild day (hovering around zero). Soon, with our baggage all arriving, we met up with our superb local guide Chieko. Having worked with Chieko before, we were greeted warmly before being escorted to our awaiting bus.

Soon on the road, driving across the winter wonderland of Hokkaido, we were heading inland to our first stop, Tsurumidai. This spot is well known for the cranes that gather here each winter to feed on grain left out by an accommodating farmer. This was our first chance to catch a glimpse of these elegant birds. Formerly, the birds nearly went extinct, but thanks to concerted efforts (including registered feeding sites such as this), the cranes have made a remarkable recovery.

While we were here, we watched a few birds as they searched for food in the snow, while brown-eared bulbul, long-tailed and Japanese tits flitted around in the nearby trees. With the day getting away from us, and with the light fading, we decided to head on to our hotel. As we worked our way northwards across the island, the open fields turned to forest-clad hills and as day turned to night, heavy snow started to fall. Our coach driver expertly negotiated the challenging conditions, dropping us off at our hotel – the Kawayu Kanko Hotel.

We had a little time to settle into our rooms and freshen up after a very long day of travel, before reconvening for our first traditional banquet dinner. These gastronomic masterclasses are one of the big appeals of staying at traditional Japanese onsens (as well as the thermally-heated public baths). As we gathered in the banquet hall, a spectacular feast was laid out before us. With Chieko on hand, we had some guidance on what each dish was and how to go about eating it without causing offence.

With full stomachs and an early morning the following day, it was soon time to retreat to our rooms for a very well-deserved sleep.

**Day 3:****Saturday 11 January 2025**

Otowa Bridge, Tsurui Ito Crane Sanctuary &amp; Lake Kussharo

With around an hour's journey to our first stop, Otowa Bridge, we set off well before dawn. We were provided with a breakfast box, hot coffee and tea and set off through a winter wonderland. Arriving at the bridge in the dark, the group set up their tripods to wait for the sunrise and the roosting cranes to wake from their slumber. The cranes roost in the river each night as the waters stay above freezing and provide refuge from predators. It was a beautiful morning with a light band of cloud to the east, but it was well below

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-10 degrees Celsius and so everyone was well-wrapped in their winter gear.

We weren't sure whether we would get a sunrise at first, but the band of clouds started to dissipate and the warm golden light pierced through. Frustratingly, there weren't many cranes roosting this morning, so we had limited photographic opportunities.



However, it was a magical sunrise and we were rewarded with some fantastic flight shots instead.



With the sun now above the horizon, we hopped back aboard the bus, enjoying some warmth before our next shortstop. There are a pair of Ural owls which roost in a tree hollow, just a little way down the road from the bridge, so we ventured off to see if we could find them. Upon our arrival, we had to walk a couple of hundred metres through the fresh snow to the tree. Unfortunately, the owls were not in their usual spot. Having been here before, and finding the owls hidden among the surrounding trees, I decided to have a quick scan around. To my amazement, an owl was sitting in the bough of a tree some 27 metres away. The camouflage was exceptional. The group were able to position themselves one at a time to photograph this beautiful species – a Japanese subspecies.

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In order to avoid disturbing the bird, as soon as everyone was happy with their shots, we left the owl in peace. We were soon back aboard the warmth of the bus and on our way to Tsurui Ito Crane Sanctuary. Upon our arrival, the feeding had just taken place and there were around 75 birds on site. The sun was now shining brightly and the birds seemed to be enjoying the warmth provided. Each member of the group set themselves up in a spot and tried to capture moments of behaviour, as well as portraits as and when the opportunities presented themselves.



The lighting was particularly challenging this morning and so we had to make the best of the situation. Also, as it was earlier in the season, the cranes were not as busy performing their bonding rituals, focusing more on feeding before taking flight. With opportunities limited, we headed back to the nearby Tsururumidai and found plenty more birds, including a white-naped crane. This bird was hundreds of miles from where it should be, but seemingly more than happy to be living with the red-crowned cranes and was busy feeding.

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Having had an action-packed morning, it was time to start making our way toward Lake Kussharo. On the way, we made a booking at a local restaurant and enjoyed a fabulous meal. Upon our arrival at Lake Kussharo, after lunch, we discovered that the lake hadn't yet frozen. This was something that I had never seen before and it meant photographing the whooper swans was a lot more challenging than usual. The snow had started to fall again as we walked from the bus to the lake shore.



The swans usually gather on the shore where warm, thermal water keeps the ice at bay, However, this year, with no ice, the swans seemed to gather simply because the warmer water provided some respite from the cold. I suggested to the group that the best bet was to focus on the details, to capture intimate portraits and shots of birds on the water. As the snow was heavier and the light was fading, we decided to call time and head back to the hotel. A couple of us gathered in the lobby and edited some of the images from the day, while others enjoyed the delights of the hotel's onsen.

Tonight, we had our second banquet dinner, another veritable feast of Japanese cuisine. Tomorrow, we will

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be heading on to our next stop, the coastal town of Rausu.

**Day 4:**

**Sunday 12 January 2025**

Sulphur Mountain, Kawayo to Rausu

We awoke to another morning with fresh snow on the ground. We had breakfast at the hotel today, a full buffet with a huge amount of traditional Japanese options, alongside continental options. With a long drive ahead, everyone ensured they had their fill, before heading back to our rooms, collecting our luggage and meeting down in the hotel lobby.

Setting off through the stunning snow-laden landscape, the bus soon pulled into the spectacular geothermal features of Sulphur Mountain. Here, hundreds of sulphurous vents spew out steam and boiling water, leaving the area devoid of vegetation and creating a spectacular, alien-like world.



With plenty of miles to cover, it was soon time to head back on the road and make our way to the small coastal town of Rausu. The journey took around three and a half hours, with a brief stop at a convenience store to grab some lunch and snacks.

Upon our arrival at Rausu, we had a little time to wander before heading to the dock where our boat was waiting for us. This year, the Sea of Okhotsk had next to no sea ice, so we would be unable to photograph the eagles on the ice. However, the sea wall and calm seas meant we would have plenty of opportunities to photograph both Steller's sea eagle and white-tailed eagle. Once we were all aboard, we discovered that we were the only group aboard and this meant that we could maximise the photographic opportunities for the group.

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Starting out on the open water, we photographed both species of eagle as they came in to pluck fish off the water's surface. For such large birds, the speed and agility is exceptional and photographing them in mid-dive is no easy task. The group had plenty of approaches to get their eye in, and with three more boat trips planned, we knew there would be plenty more opportunity.

With many of the eagles taking their fish back to the wall of the harbour, or the trees on the mountains above the town, we decided to manoeuvre the boat alongside the sea wall and capture some images as the birds gathered. The photography opportunities here, with a dusting of snow on top of the wall, are equally rewarding and it is easy to build up a portfolio of striking imagery. The group did superbly well, capturing some breathtaking imagery.

As well as the two species of eagle, we also enjoyed views of red-breasted merganser, harlequin duck, carrion crow, Japanese (thick-billed) crow, as well as glaucous, slaty-backed and black-tailed gulls. After a couple of hours worth of photography, it was time to head back to the dock and alight the boat. What a fabulous first session on board, with some excellent images already in the bank. Coming earlier in the season meant we had the birds all to ourselves and therefore we had a glut of birds coming and going as and when we were ready for them.

Once we were back on shore, we drove the short distance to the rest stop and the toilets, before having a little drive along the coastline to see if we could see any other wildlife. Except for some sea ducks, there wasn't too much about so we headed back to the hotel to check into our rooms.

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After a great day of photography, we only had a little bit of time to settle in our rooms before we reconvened in the lobby for our final photographic session of the day. We were heading to a local spot where a Blakiston's fish owl can be photographed. We set off, with our camera gear and set ourselves up at the large windows (which can be opened for photography). We only had a short session this evening, as we had dinner planned in a local restaurant. Unfortunately, despite a few hours of waiting, we were unlucky on this occasion and made our way to the restaurant in two separate runs (the shuttle minibus was too small to fit the entire group). Everyone enjoyed an excellent meal before returning to the hotel, on two separate journeys again.

**Day 5:**  
Rausu

**Monday 13 January 2025**

After an amazing first afternoon in Rausu, this morning we had a dawn cruise to photograph the eagles once again. We hoped to enjoy the stunning morning light, photographing eagles around the harbour and out on the open water again. And so we boarded the boat, just as the light was coming up and we set out from the harbour, eagerly anticipating the photography opportunities on offer. The low light levels made it challenging to capture in-flight shots, but as the sun rose higher in the sky, the number of backlighting shots increased.

As the boat trip continued, the sun continued to shine and we headed to the harbour wall. It was here that we were rewarded with the very best photography opportunities of the morning and the action was spectacular.

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As the light continually improved, it became easier and easier to capture a variety of in-flight shots, including images against the forest-clad hills.



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What a fantastic morning. As we headed back to shore, we disembarked the boat and climbed aboard the bus. Driving the short distance back to the hotel, we soon arrived and were handed breakfast boxes which we were able to enjoy in the comfort of our rooms. We had the opportunity to charge our batteries and back up our images, before the next boat trip (after lunch). Today, lunch was to be at a small restaurant in the town of Rausu, only a stone's throw away from the harbour and our boat. It was another delicious, hearty meal, the perfect way to warm up before another cold photographic session on the boat.

The light this afternoon was exceptional and we were heading out to capture flight shots to start with. Big blue skies and soft light on the water provided the perfect conditions to photograph the eagles as they flew around us and snatched fish from the water's surface.



Having already had a couple of sessions on the boat, our hit rate seemed to improve and we were able to capture a wider array of imagery. With such good light, we were able to use fast shutter speeds and ensure that our images of the high-speed dives were sharp.

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As the eagle numbers started to dwindle, we saw numerous birds sitting up on the harbour wall once again. With that in mind, we headed to the wall for another photographic session.



With time running out, we started to make our way back to the point of embarkation. The spectacular Mt. Rausu was visible above the town and a flock of Harlequin ducks took flight across the calm waters of the harbour. What a fantastic second afternoon on the water with stunning photography and some memorable action. One of the reasons we organise several boat trips is to maximise opportunities, but also allow for bad weather where sailing may be impossible.

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Once back on shore, we transferred back to the hotel where once again we had the chance to back up and edit photos (or rest). I sat down in the lobby for anyone interested in editing tips or tricks before we reconvened for a second session with the Blakiston's fish owl. We would be using the small bus to get there this evening, so we split the group, arriving around twenty minutes apart. As the first group arrived, a female sika deer was feeding along the river bank. We set ourselves up, tripods and cameras at the ready for the owl's arrival. By the time the second group arrived, the deer had gone and we were all in position. Chieko had brought us dinner boxes and a birthday cake (for one of the group members who had a birthday at the start of the trip). Some of the group decided to leave after a few hours, while the others decided that 10 pm would be our time of departure.

For the half of the group that decided to stay, we were incredibly lucky. The owl turned up at 9.43 pm. It stayed for only a few minutes but provided us with an opportunity to photograph the world's largest owl. For some, this was the highlight of the trip. A bird that very few in the world ever get to see is always a draw for photographers and naturalists alike.



What a success! With tired eyes, we returned to the comfort and warmth of the hotel for a very well-deserved rest.

**Day 6:**  
Rausu, Shibetsu & Yoroushi

**Tuesday 14 January 2025**

This morning was another early one. We arose well before dawn, once again, in order to be on the boat for sunrise. This would be our last boat trip to photograph the eagles and we decided to focus our efforts on the harbour wall as the sun rose behind the clouds and up above the Kuril Islands of Russia. We couldn't have asked for better conditions and what made this even better, was the light, so different to all our previous sessions on the boat.

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It was an exceptional final session and we couldn't have asked for more. The soft light kept changing, making flight shots challenging, but the portraits on top of the harbour wall were out of this world.



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With the session coming to an end, we headed back to the point where we could disembark and take a short journey by coach back to the hotel. Just like yesterday, we were handed our breakfast boxes and headed to our rooms to eat and pack up our things. Today we were leaving Rausu and heading to Yoroushi for our final night in Hokkaido.

On the way, we stopped off at Shibetsu Port where we saw tufted and harlequin ducks, goldeneye and greater scaup. We carried on to a couple of small parks, hoping to spot some sought-after bird species, including the local variant of long-tailed tit, Japanese pygmy woodpecker and a number of other passerines. We had some brief views of the long-tailed tits, but the Japanese woodpecker eluded us. We did have a brief view of a red fox as it crossed the path and disappeared into the trees.

We had bought lunch at a convenience store en route, and so we started to make our way to our final, and without a doubt, most spectacular ryokan yet. We arrived at Hotel Daiichi, a beautiful, traditional ryokan in a stunning riverside location. Almost immediately, we were rewarded with views of a Japanese pygmy woodpecker, on the feeders outside the lobby window. After a little confusion with the rooms, everyone settled into the stunning accommodation. There wasn't much daylight left, but some of the group headed back to the feeders to see what else might turn up.

Everybody met up in the hotel lobby for our final evening meal in Hokkaido. We were shown to our private dining area for yet another banquet. This spectacular spread was another gastronomic wonder, with many different dishes to navigate and etiquettes to observe. What a fabulous final meal together with Chieko. The group had written some lovely words to her in a card and she was incredibly thankful – as were we for her fantastic guidance over the past few days.

#### **Day 7:**

**Wednesday 15 January 2025**

Yoroushi to Kushiro, flight to Tokyo

Ordinarily, we would wake up early and head to Lake Furen on this day, but unfortunately this year (due to unseasonably warm weather before we arrived) the lake hadn't frozen. With that in mind, we decided to stay at the hotel this morning and enjoy the birdlife from the large windows. We were not in a hurry to leave, with an afternoon flight back to Tokyo, we enjoyed a leisurely breakfast. It was whilst we were eating that we were treated to views of a solitary snipe on the edge of the water, as well as a brown dipper.

It would take us a couple of hours to get back to Kushiro, with a brief stop at a convenience store to grab sandwiches and snacks. Upon our arrival at the airport, it was time to say our goodbyes to Chieko and after a quick group photo, it was time to head through security and catch our flight back to Tokyo.

We arrived in the afternoon and caught the train from the airport to Shinagawa, where it was only a short walk to the hotel. The group were soon checked into their rooms and able to spend a free night in Tokyo. Most people decided to stay close to the hotel to eat and head to bed early after a very busy few days.

#### **Day 8:**

**Thursday 16 January 2025**

Tokyo to Nagano, on to Yamanouchi

This morning, we dropped our main piece of luggage at the hotel's store room and met in the lobby with just our camera gear and a small bag for the next few days. Once we were all together, we crossed the road and hopped on a local train from Shinagawa station to central Tokyo. It was here that we caught a Shinkansen (bullet train) to the city of Nagano – famed for hosting the 1998 Winter Olympics.

Taking a Shinkansen is always such a joy, these super smooth, incredibly fast trains are the perfect way to cover long distances in Japan. We arrived in Nagano on time, no surprise there, and transferred to a local train that whisked us through the spectacular scenery up to the town of Yamanouchi. Upon our arrival, we had a short transfer on the hotel shuttle. Unfortunately, we were unable to check in for a couple of hours,

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and so many of the group went for a wander, exploring the small streets of this charming town. The rest of the afternoon was free to relax, which was particularly welcome after a very busy couple of days.

Everyone reconvened on the top floor of the hotel, in a private banquet hall for our final traditional dinner in Japan. We enjoyed another exceptional meal, before retiring to our rooms.

### **Day 9:**

**Friday 17 January 2025**

Yamanouchi; Jigokudani Monkey Park

We awoke to a winter wonderland. Overnight it had snowed heavily and the town was covered in a blanket of fresh snow. We had a traditional Japanese breakfast, before grabbing our things and hopping aboard the hotel shuttle to the start of the trail to the monkey park. A walk of 1.6 kilometres lay ahead of us, and everyone wearing their snow grips on their boots started to make their way along the track up to where we would spend the day photographing the famed snow monkeys. With everyone walking at a different pace, I stayed at the back ensuring that everyone made it safely, while our local guide handed out tickets as each member arrived at the entrance.

The hotel organised set shuttle times so members of the group could set off at different times, as and when it suited them. At the start of the trail is also a fantastic café, so for those wanting a break in the middle of the day, this is another option (despite the walk back to the monkeys). As we worked our way closer to the monkeys the amount of snow was spectacular. We couldn't have asked for better conditions.



First thing, the monkeys were feeding on the grain that was spread out for them and so there were only a couple of individuals bathing in the thermally heated pool – the monkeys' very own onsen. There were not

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too many people around the pools so it was easier to get into position for intimate portraits as they revelled in the hot pool.



It's fascinating watching the macaques as they show their complex social structures, allowing some high-

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ranking individuals to bathe, while others are chased away from the warming waters. The longer the individuals spend in the pool, the more intense the pink colouration on their faces becomes. This means it's possible to build up a stunning portfolio of imagery in a short space of time. Snow falling throughout our time with the 'snow monkeys', added another layer of context to the stunning photography opportunities presented to the group.



Typically, the best place to focus your time is from the area which is at eye level with the bathing macaques. However, sometimes it is worth exploring different angles. It is also possible to capture some environmental shots on the surrounding rocks and within the deep snow.



With the snow falling all around us, and the macaques enjoying the water, there were further opportunities to add to our portfolio.



The majority of the group left around lunchtime, catching a shuttle back to the hotel, while the last few stayed until mid-afternoon. With the snow still falling and the cold slowly seeping in, it was time to wander back to the café for a hot drink and a snack, before catching the last shuttle of the day back to the hotel. There was no meal organized at the hotel this evening, so we set out as a group to try and find a restaurant. It was a Friday night and was very busy, so we ended up at an American eatery by the train station. Some of the group went off in search of traditional Japanese cuisine.

Our time in Yamanouchi was coming to an end and we returned to the hotel for a good night's sleep.

**Day 10:**

**Saturday 18 January 2025**

Yamanouchi to Nagano, Zenko-ji temple; Shinkansen to Tokyo

It had snowed again overnight, but today we would be leaving Yamanouchi, bound for Tokyo. A traditional Japanese breakfast was served to us again this morning before we grabbed our bags and met up in the hotel lobby for our shuttle bus down to the train station. We arrived to find a very busy station, with a long line of people queueing to board the incoming train.

We enjoyed a smooth train ride down to Nagano, where we dropped off our luggage in lockers, before catching a couple of taxis to a restaurant near Zenko-ji temple. We enjoyed a fabulous lunch, before heading up to the temple and looking around the spectacular structures and enjoying the historic surrounding buildings. It wasn't long before it was time to head back to the train station, pick up our luggage and catch the Shinkansen back to Tokyo. The journey was incredibly smooth, as you would expect, and we arrived in Tokyo on time. We caught the train back to Shinagawa, where we checked into the hotel (after a slight delay) and picked up our main luggage. I invited everyone to join me at the rooftop bar, buying everyone a drink while enjoying the spectacular views of the sprawling city beyond.

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We enjoyed a lovely round of drinks with the spectacular view, before going in search of dinner. Some people decided to have an early night, while others headed to the hotel's food court – where they could choose whatever cuisine they fancied. With another early start, everyone said goodnight and we returned to our rooms for our final sleep in Japan.

**Day 11:**  
Tokyo to London

**Sunday 19 January 2025**

Most of the group headed down for breakfast when the restaurant opened at 6 am, with a minibus booked to take us to the airport at 7 am. We enjoyed a very straightforward drive to the airport and we were soon checked in to our flight back to London.

The direct flight departed a little late, but we made up some time in the air and arrived on time at London Heathrow. By the time we had passed through immigration and arrived in the baggage hall, the first luggage was already arriving. With all our luggage collected, we said our goodbyes and wished everyone well for their onward journeys home.

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# Checklist for Japan's Winter Wildlife Photography Special



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10
	<b>Birds</b>										
1	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>		✓			✓				
2	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓			✓				
3	Green-winged teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>					✓				
4	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					✓				
5	Greater scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>					✓				
6	Harlequin duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>			✓	✓	✓				
7	Black scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</i>		✓							
8	Common goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>					✓				
9	Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		✓			✓				
10	Red-breasted merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓				
11	Red-faced cormorant	<i>Urile urile</i>			✓	✓					
12	Pelagic cormorant	<i>Urile pelagicus</i>				✓					
13	Spectacled guillemot	<i>Cepphus columba</i>					✓				
14	Ancient murrelet	<i>Synthliboramphus antiquus</i>				✓					
15	Black-tailed gull	<i>Larus crassirostris</i>			✓	✓	✓				
16	Glaucous gull	<i>Larus hyperboreus</i>			✓	✓					
17	Glaucous-winged gull	<i>Larus glaucescens</i>				✓	✓				
18	Slaty-backed gull	<i>Larus schistisagus</i>			✓	✓	✓				
19	Solitary snipe	<i>Gallinago solitaria</i>						✓			
20	White-naped crane	<i>Antigone vipio</i>		✓							

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21	Red-crowned crane	<i>Grus japonensis</i>	✓	✓				✓			
22	Great egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>					✓		✓		
23	Grey heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>					✓				
24	Black-eared kite	<i>Milvus migrans lineatus</i>							✓		✓
25	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓				
26	Steller's sea eagle	<i>Haliaeetus pelagicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓				
27	Rough-legged buzzard	<i>Buteo lagopus</i>		✓							
28	Blakiston's fish owl	<i>Ketupa blakistoni</i>				✓					
29	Ural owl	<i>Strix uralensis japonica</i>		✓							
30	Japanese pygmy woodpecker	<i>Yungipicus kizuki</i>					✓	✓			
31	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>		✓			✓	✓			
32	Eurasian jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>					✓	✓			
33	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
34	Japanese crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
35	Dusky thrush	<i>Turdus eunomus</i>					✓				
36	Brown dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>						✓			
37	Brown-eared bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes amaurotis</i>	✓	✓			✓	✓			
38	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	✓				✓	✓			
39	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>					✓	✓			
40	Japanese tit	<i>Parus cinereus</i>	✓				✓	✓			
41	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					✓	✓			
42	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>					✓	✓			
43	White-cheeked starling	<i>Spodiopsar cineraceus</i>		✓							
	<b>Mammals</b>										
1	Sika deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>		✓		✓	✓			✓	
2	Minke whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>				✓					

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3	Steller sea lion	<i>Eumetopias jubatus</i>				✓	✓				
4	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		✓	✓		✓				

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