

Tour Report

Japan's Winter Wildlife – Photography Special

29 January – 8 February 2023

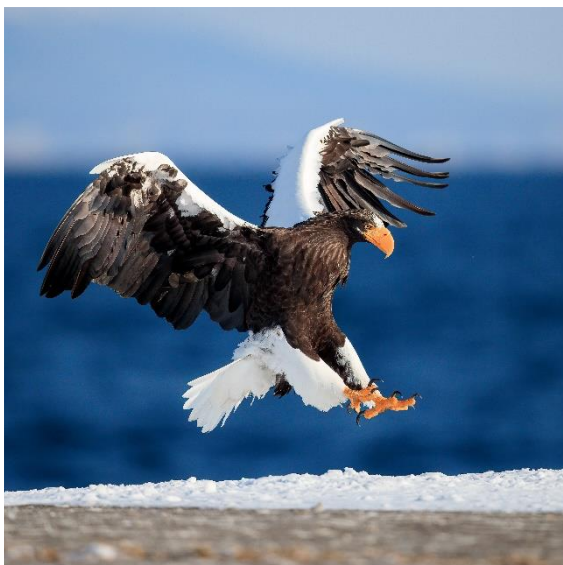
Red-crowned cranes at dawn



Whooper swan



Steller's sea eagle



Japanese macaque



Compiled by Bret Charman

Day 1: London Heathrow to Tokyo Haneda**Sunday 29 January 2023**

Most of the group met at the gate for the flight at London's Heathrow Airport. We would arrive the following morning in Tokyo for our onwards flight to Kushiro, on the Japanese island of Hokkaido.

Day 2: Tokyo to Kushiro – on to Lake Kussharo**Monday 30 January 2023**

We arrived at Kushiro after lunch, where we were met by our local translator Chikako. We climbed aboard the comfortable bus for our transfer to Lake Kussharo. On our way, we stopped off at Tsurumidai for our first brief encounter with the region's much-loved red-crowned cranes. These magnificent birds are incredibly important in Japanese culture and have recovered in numbers from the brink of extinction. After a very short stop, we quickly boarded the bus again for the remainder of the journey to Lake Kussharo.

It was a beautiful sunny day, and the stunning mountains and volcanoes were covered in snow – a veritable winter wonderland. Nearing the lake, we realised the light was fading and watched as the sun disappeared behind the surrounding mountains. All along the road were hundreds of sika deer and at the lake shore there were around a 100 swans. We enjoyed a short session photographing the swans, knowing we would have more opportunities to photograph them the following day.

We returned to the bus and headed the short distance to the Kawayu Kanko Hotel, where we would be staying for the next couple of nights. After a little time to settle into our rooms, we reconvened for dinner. What a feast it was. We shared a celebratory meal of traditional Japanese dishes - sushi, sashimi, rice and pickles.

With an early start the next morning, the group called it a night.

Day 3: Otowa Bridge, Lake Mashu & Lake Kasshuro**Tuesday 31 January 2023**

In the morning we drove to the magical location of Otowa Bridge, a famed roosting spot for the red-crowned crane. To ease into our early start, we took flasks for coffee and picked up a breakfast box to enjoy on the bus. Upon our arrival, the bridge was already crowded with people waiting for the sun to rise over the river where the cranes roost. We all managed to find a spot to set up our tripods before the sun started to appear over the surrounding hills. It was exceptionally cold, but the group were all in good spirits as the ice settled on our tripods and lenses.

As the sun cleared the hills, it threw a beautiful golden light across the valley. The higher it rose in the sky, the more active the cranes became. The cranes started to move across the river as the mist filling the valley dispersed, then re-emerged. An ethereal scene that now lay before us: mist rising from the river bed, illuminated in golden light. Two gunshots were heard in the distance. Then something startled the cranes – some took flight, while others held their ground. It was only then that we realised the gunshots had spooked a family of sika deer, which were crossing the river. It was the deer that had disturbed the cranes, creating photography opportunities that were absolutely exceptional. What a perfect start to our first morning on the island of Hokkaido, we really could not have asked for more.

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After a spectacular morning at Otowa Bridge, we headed towards a spot famed for its resident pair of Ural owls. Upon our arrival, we made our way down the icy track and into the trees, where we found one owl sitting enjoying the morning sun. It didn't even open its eyes.



Once everyone had the shots they wanted, we moved on to Ito Red-Crowned Crane Sanctuary for a morning photographing the birds on the snowy fields where they gather to feed. Ideally, we would have liked overcast conditions, or maybe even some snowfall, but we had to make do with warm sunshine. Around 100 or so birds had gathered to feed, and we watched as they interacted with one another, sometimes displaying and

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at other times chasing one another. It was a wonderful way to spend the morning and overall, there were some excellent photography opportunities across the three different sites.



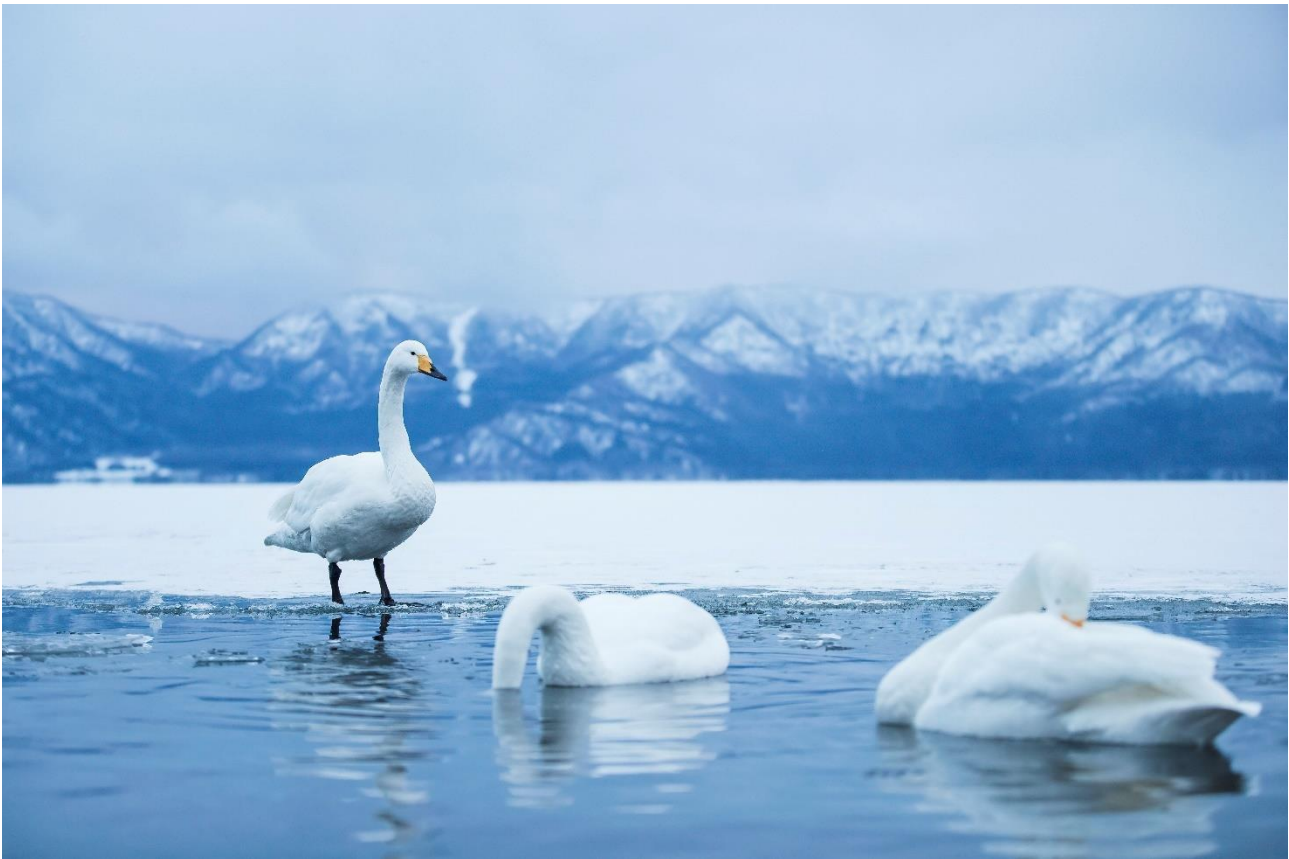
For lunch, we headed to a nearby restaurant and were served a delicious meal in a traditional bento box. With our stomachs full, we started to make our way back towards Lake Kussharo. There, we had the opportunity to stop at the spectacular Lake Mashu – a crater lake with fantastic views. We saw a whole herd of sika deer feeding on the steep slopes and we were able to photograph these very handsome mammals.



We headed back down the mountain to Lake Kussharo for an afternoon session with whooper swans. As the clouds descended over the surrounding mountains, a soft blue light filled the landscape, allowing the group to capture some stunning imagery of the swans. It was a very productive session with the swans and everyone was rewarded with wonderful imagery.

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On returning to the hotel, yet another traditional feast was laid out for dinner. Then, after an action-packed day, the group slowly tore themselves away for a very well-deserved sleep.

Day 4: Sulphur Mountain & Shiretoko Cruise

Wednesday 1 February 2023

We had a leisurely start with breakfast at the hotel before heading the short distance to Sulphur Mountain. This spectacular spot is only a few minutes away from the hotel, but the spectacular sulphurous steam vents and jaw-dropping scenery make it a sight to behold. It wasn't long before we were back on the road, heading north-east towards the coast of Hokkaido. Our destination was the fishing town of Rausu on the remote Shiretoko Peninsula.

On our way, we stopped at a convenience store to buy lunch before continuing on to the harbour.. It was in Rausu harbour that we hoped to photograph overwintering Steller's sea eagle and white-tailed eagles. We got off the bus, and started boarding our vessel for our first cruise. We couldn't have known what we were about to experience.

We had barely cleared the harbour walls when the naturalist on the top deck spotted something in the distance. The boat immediately changed course and we started heading directly out to sea. It was then that we realised a huge pod of orca were in the channel. We spent the next half an hour or so enjoying remarkably close encounters with between 30 and 40 orcas. It was particularly special when some of the pod decided to swim right alongside the boat, including a mother and calf, and a fully grown male.

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Orca are often seen here in the summer months, but the crew had never had an encounter like this in the winter. Those moments we shared with the wonderful cetaceans were very special.



When it was time to leave the orca, we headed back towards the harbour for a spot of eagle photography. Again, this did not disappoint, as we were treated to exceptional views of the birds catching fish from the water's surface. There were numerous close passes by both white-tailed eagle and Steller's sea eagle. These magnificent birds are often the highlight for people visiting Japan in winter. The only thing that was missing was the sea ice that often sits in the channel, but after such a magical day that was not on anyone's mind.

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As we disembarked the boat, everyone was grinning from ear to ear. What a day to remember. We made our way down the coast to our hotel before a quick turnaround to the Blakiston fish owl observatory. We waited for the owl to show, but unfortunately, this time we were not so lucky– although a red fox did make a brief appearance before making a hasty retreat. With another action-packed day behind us, we couldn't be greedy and determined we would make do with the orca and stunning eagles from the afternoon.

It was a short journey back to the hotel where a banquet awaited us. The weather was starting to close in around us, and unfortunately our scheduled cruises for the following day were cancelled due to excessively strong winds. As we settled in, the heavy snowfall and strong winds were creating deep snow drifts around the hotel – which wouldn't be revealed until the following morning.



Day 5: Day of photo editing in Rausu

Thursday 2 February 2023

We awoke to a world of strong winds and heavy snow. There were huge snow drifts all around the hotel when we met the group for breakfast. With no hurry to go anywhere, we had a leisurely breakfast before arranging to meet back for a photo editing session and demonstration.

It was a very productive morning. The group learned some tricks of the trade and had time to work on their images. There was then a little free time as the winds started to ease a little and the snow abated. We visited a nearby observatory in a second attempt to see Blakiston's fish owl, but once again it eluded us. The fox made another appearance, posing for photographs before disappearing off into the night.

We ended the day with a big meal of local delicacies. Tomorrow morning we were off out on the water once again to photograph the eagles for which Rausu is best known.

Day 6: Shiretoko cruise – journey to Dai Ichi

Friday 3 February 2023

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In the morning, we awoke bright and early for a dawn cruise from Rausu. The sea ice was still a far way to the north and, after the storm the day before, the operators were nervous about venturing too far from port. With that in mind, we spent the first part of the voyage close to the harbour wall, capturing a range of shots as the birds flew in front of the rising sun and plucked the fish from the water. Photography was trickier this morning, but nonetheless the opportunities were excellent and everyone was able to capture breath-taking imagery. By under-exposing, it was possible to capture striking silhouettes and maximise the magnificent colours of the morning sun.



With the sun now rising ever higher in the sky, the light was getting harsh and harder to work with, so we headed towards the harbour wall where the birds gathered and rested. Here, we were able to capture some full-frame portraits of white-tailed eagles perched right next to the vessel.

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We then had a little time to explore the town before our next cruise, which we had managed to rearrange from the day before. Our second cruise was a little less productive, but we were able to capture some stunning images of white-tailed eagles again - this time in the falling snow.



After another fabulous morning on the island of Hokkaido, it was time to move on once more. We were heading to a traditional onsen - Dai Ichi. Here, there is the chance to see a wealth of birds, such as the charming Japanese pygmy woodpecker and the Japanese tit, along with more familiar species like marsh tit

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and nuthatch. Some of the group watched the feeders as the birds came in, while others enjoyed the comforts of the large rooms before our scheduled dinner.

Only moments after we had all sat down to eat, an alert went out for the hotel's star species – the Blakiston's fish owl. There it was, a veritable leviathan, the world's largest owl sat only metres away from us. After catching a few fish, the owl decided to depart and we returned to our feast before heading to bed.



Day 7: Lake Furen, Kushiro to Tokyo

Saturday 4 February 2023

Lake Furen is an unusual setting, where a local café owner puts fish out on a frozen lake and hundreds of eagles come in for an easy meal. It is a truly spectacular scene that cannot be witnessed anywhere else in the world. Not only are Steller's sea eagles found here, but there are also countless white-tailed eagles and several black-eared kites. We spent an hour at the lake before our afternoon flight from Kushiro back to Tokyo for the second half of the trip. It was another beautiful day, and the conditions couldn't really have been better for the group.

We had been so lucky with the weather, except for the one day at Rausu. What's more, the wildlife had been incredibly obliging and provided the group with some fabulous photography opportunities. What a great start to our first trip back to Japan post-Covid.

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Our journey to the airport was smooth with a quick stop at a convenience store to buy lunch. Our flight left on time, and we soon found ourselves at Tokyo Haneda, where we were met by another wonderful translator. We hopped on our bus and were whisked to our hotel in Tokyo, where everyone had the freedom to enjoy a meal of their choice before the next part of our adventure.

Day 8: Tokyo to Yamanouchi via Nagano

Sunday 5 February 2023

We enjoyed a leisurely breakfast at the hotel, then met in the lobby to begin our journey to the city of Nagano. We would be travelling westwards into the mountains on the Shinkansen (or bullet train), but first, we caught a local train to Tokyo Station with the help of our local guide. It was a lovely smooth journey and we arrived on the platform with plenty of time before our train was due to depart. The bullet train is a fantastic experience; you are whisked across the vast city of Tokyo, before entering a tunnel and emerging in the middle of the spectacular mountains of Honshu.

Upon our arrival in Nagano, we were met by another local guide and a bus was waiting for us. We crossed the large valley, taking in some of Japan's most breath-taking scenery. The surrounding mountains and forests are a refuge for numerous endemic species – one of which is the Japanese macaque, or 'snow monkey' as they are often referred to. These charismatic primates would be our focus while staying in the hill town of Yamanouchi.

In the afternoon there was a little time for a brief introduction to the macaques, to relax, and to enjoy the town's traditional streets. Sean and I decided to do a little recce to see how the path up to the monkeys would be the following morning. The path was icy, but for the most part (with ice grips) it was fine as we wound ourselves up the valley to the snow monkey park.

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The macaques were enjoying the warm waters of the hot pools, but the steam provides a challenge when trying to capture a clean image. With a bit of patience, you can eventually be rewarded with some fabulous portrait photographs. The group enjoyed a relaxing evening, knowing that the following day we would be able to focus our efforts on the monkeys and their antics around the hot springs.



Day 9: Japanese macaques at Jigokudani

Monday 6 February 2023

After enjoying a later breakfast, we caught the bus up to the start of the trail to the snow monkey park – Jigokudani. It was a much colder day, with a frosty wind blowing down the valley from the high mountain tops, but we made our way up the winding path to the park entrance. The path was icy nearly all the way along, but with our grips, we made good progress and quickly made our way to the park entrance. The monkeys were already enjoying the warm waters of the hot spring by the time we arrived, and the group set themselves up in the best viewing spot. With the wind blowing down the valley, the steam was blowing towards us and it was tricky to get a clearing for clean images. However, with a whole day ahead, we were able to be patient and wait for those intimate moments and capture some stunning imagery.

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After a morning in freezing conditions photographing monkeys enjoying a warm bath, most of the group decided to head back down the path to a nearby café. There, we were treated to a fantastic meal, coffee and some much-needed hot chocolate.

With full stomachs and warmer bodies, we started to make our way back up the valley for our second session with the macaques. The wind was still blowing down the valley and the steam continued to pose a challenge for us. Despite this, there were plenty of opportunities to take gorgeous photographs, as many of the snow monkeys were foraging, grooming and playing.

Then sunlight started streaming into the gorge, and the monkeys sat enjoying the relative warmth. While the adult macaques were reinforcing their bonds and cementing their position within the complex social structures, the young were busy playing and enjoying the freedom of youth.

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After a long day in the freezing surroundings of Hell Valley, the group started to leave at different times. Several buses were departing throughout the afternoon, so our group dissipated, with some heading back early to the comfort and warmth of the hotel. All in all, it was a fabulous day and the group had captured some beautiful images.

Day 10: Temple of Zenko-ji & shinkansen to Tokyo

Tuesday 7 February 2023

Our last full day in Japan was to be a busy one. After a western-style breakfast, we met in the hotel lobby for our bus journey to Nagano and the ancient temple of Zenko-ji. This spectacular temple is a fantastic place to learn about Japan's culture and history. It is truly a magnificent place to visit and one of the country's treasured landmarks.

After an hour or so of exploring the temple and the surrounding area, we reconvened for the short bus journey to Nagano station. We made a brief stop at a convenience store to buy some lunch before navigating our way through the station and onto our bullet train back to Tokyo. As usual, the train ran perfectly on time, and we arrived at Tokyo station as per its schedule. Here we were met by our local guide, who escorted us through the station and onto the local train to Shibetsu station, where we would spend our final night.

Many of the group had decided to head into Shibuya Crossing for their final evening – the famed pedestrian crossing of Greater Tokyo. We enjoyed some spectacular views of thousands of people gathering to cross at the intersection, before heading to a local restaurant for our last meal together. It was a fabulous end to the trip.

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Day 11: Flight back to the UK

Wednesday 8 February 2023

Most of the group was on the same flight back to the UK, while a few were remaining in Japan for a little longer (including tour leader Sean Weekly). Those of us who were departing met bright and early in the hotel lobby, picking up a breakfast box, before climbing aboard our bus to Tokyo Haneda airport.

Upon our arrival at the airport, we were quickly checked in and headed through security and passport control. The group made their way to the gate and as soon as boarding began, and we were all aboard soon afterwards. The plane was quiet (as Japan has only recently re-opened its borders) and so we were all treated to plenty of space for our flight back to the UK.

It had been a brilliant trip with a wonderful group of like-minded people. Without a doubt, the perfect way to get back to leading and running photography tours in Japan.

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Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10
	BIRDS	<i>AVES</i>									
1	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓				
2	Mallard duck	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	✓	✓							
3	Greater scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>			✓		✓				
4	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>					✓				
5	Harlequin duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>			✓		✓				
6	Black scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</i>			✓		✓				
7	Common goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>					✓				
8	Red-breaster merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>			✓		✓				
9	Pelagic cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax pelagicus</i>			✓	✓	✓				
10	Black-eared kite	<i>Milvus migrans lineatus</i>						✓			
11	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓			
12	Steller's sea eagle	<i>Haliaeetus pelagicus</i>			✓		✓	✓			

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13	Eastern buzzard	<i>Buteo japonicus</i>			✓						
14	Red-crowned crane	<i>Grus japonensis</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓			
15	Slaty-backed gull	<i>Larus schistisagus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓			
16	Blakiston's fish owl	<i>Bubo blakistoni</i>					✓				
17	Ural owl	<i>Uralensis japonica</i>		✓							
18	Japanese pygmy woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos kizuki</i>					✓				
19	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major japonicus</i>					✓				
20	Oriental crow	<i>Corvus corone orientalis</i>	✓		✓		✓		✓		
21	Japanese (large-billed crow)	<i>Macrorhynchos japonensis</i>			✓		✓				
22	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>					✓				
23	Japanese tit	<i>Parus minor</i>					✓				
24	Brown-eared bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes amaurotis</i>		✓			✓	✓			
25	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					✓				
26	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓						✓	✓	
27	Japanese wagtail	<i>Motacilla grandis</i>			✓						
	MAMMALS	<i>MAMMALIA</i>									
1	Sika deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			

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2	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>			✓	✓					
3	Japanese macaque	<i>Macaca fuscata</i>							✓	✓	
4	Orca				✓						

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