

Tour Report

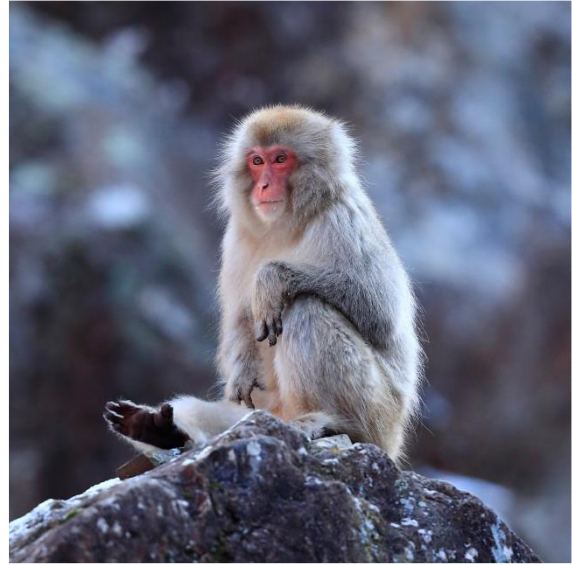
Japan's Winter Wildlife Photography

13-23 February 2020

Steller's sea eagle



Japanese macaque



Red-crowned crane



Japanese sable



Compiled by Bret Charman

Day 1: Overnight flight to Tokyo**Thursday 13 February 2020**

The majority of the group flew out from Heathrow and some of us met up at check in before heading through security and boarding our overnight flight to Tokyo.

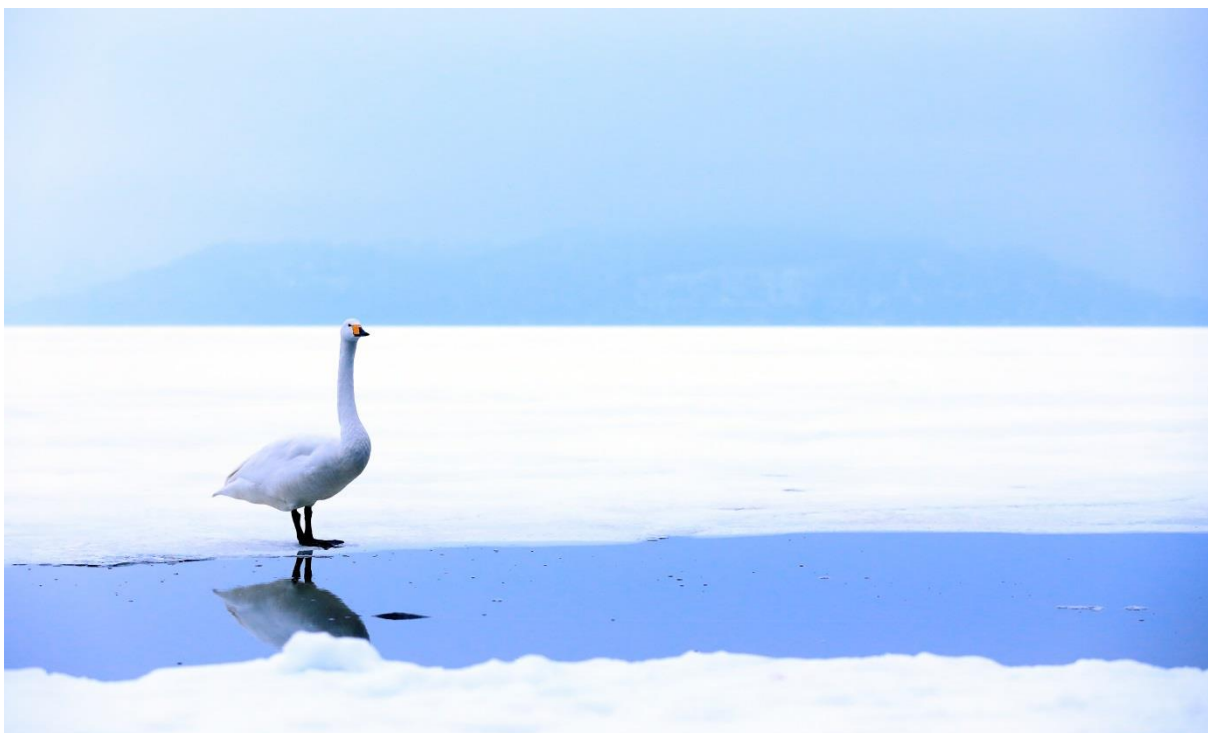
Day 2: Arrive Tokyo; fly to Kushiro**Friday 14 February 2020**

We arrived in Tokyo early and checked in to our onward flight to Kushiro on the island of Hokkaido. We had some time to wait before our flight and we chatted freely, getting to know each other a little better. One member of the group met us here after arriving in Tokyo a couple of days earlier.

Upon our arrival in Hokkaido we were met by our local guide Chieko, who explained a little about where we were going on Hokkaido and we drove to our first stop, Tsurumi Dai, one of several red-crowned crane feeding sites across the area. Once close to extinction, these birds number around the 2,000 mark and can be easily seen in the areas surrounding Kushiro Marsh. Thanks to community and conservation-led feeding centres, the cranes' population continues to rise.

We stopped for a little while, in the lovely afternoon sun, enjoying fantastic views of these magnificent birds. It wasn't long before we needed to head off towards Lake Kussharo, a site where you can photograph whooper swans on small ice-free sections of the lake with mountains all around. Sadly as we gained altitude the weather turned on us and as we arrived at the swans, the sun and visibility disappeared. We still managed to enjoy some lovely views of the swans, but photographic opportunities weren't quite as forthcoming as we would have liked. Nonetheless, the group was able to capture a range of shots of the world's largest swan.

As the light faded away, it was time to head to our first hotel of the trip, Kawayu Kanko Hotel – a traditional hotel with an onsen (Japanese communal bath) and had our own meal in a private Japanese banquet room. Chieko explained about the food we were served – it was really quite a feast.



We had an early start today, leaving the hotel at 4.45am with a packed breakfast box to eat on the bus. Our destination this morning was Otowa Bridge, a site famed for the red-crowned cranes which spend the cold nights in the relative warmth of the river water. As the sun rises you hope to see the cranes fly by in search of their first meal of the day. The morning started off cloudy and, during a light dusting of fresh snow, we watched as the cranes slowly dispersed. A lovely red fox patrolled along the river bank, pouncing for small mammals in the snow and a sika deer made an appearance on the river bank too. The sun finally started to pierce through the stubborn clouds and the water turned a lovely golden hue.



We then proceeded to a local site which is well known for a pair of Ural owls which nest in the hollow of a tree. Upon arrival in the winter wonderland that was their woodland home, it seemed as if they had disappeared. For a little while there was no sign of them, but then we heard a call from behind us. After a little scanning we eventually spotted the owls in a tree and spent the next half an hour or so photographing these beautiful birds – one in particular was more obliging.

The morning was not yet over as we headed to Tsurui-Ito Crane Sanctuary for the 9am feeding. Some 100 plus cranes gather here as they are fed grain. We watched as the birds danced and squabbled for space. Some birds called and others flew in, all of which provided numerous photographic opportunities for the next couple of hours. The sun was now shining strongly and made photographing the cranes a little more challenging, but I believe the group was able to capture some great images.

We went for lunch at a local restaurant and were treated to a traditional bento box filled with an array of amazing culinary delights. After lunch we started to make our way back north, towards the area of our hotel, stopping off on the way at the remarkable Lake Mashu – a volcanic lake famed for its crystal-clear water. As we arrived the clouds had once again descended and visibility was rather limited. However, it was here we caught our first glimpses of white-tailed and Steller's sea eagles.

We returned to the hotel for the afternoon, warming ourselves and downloading the day's photographic haul. We reconvened for another remarkable Japanese feast, once again beautifully presented and more than enough for all the group.

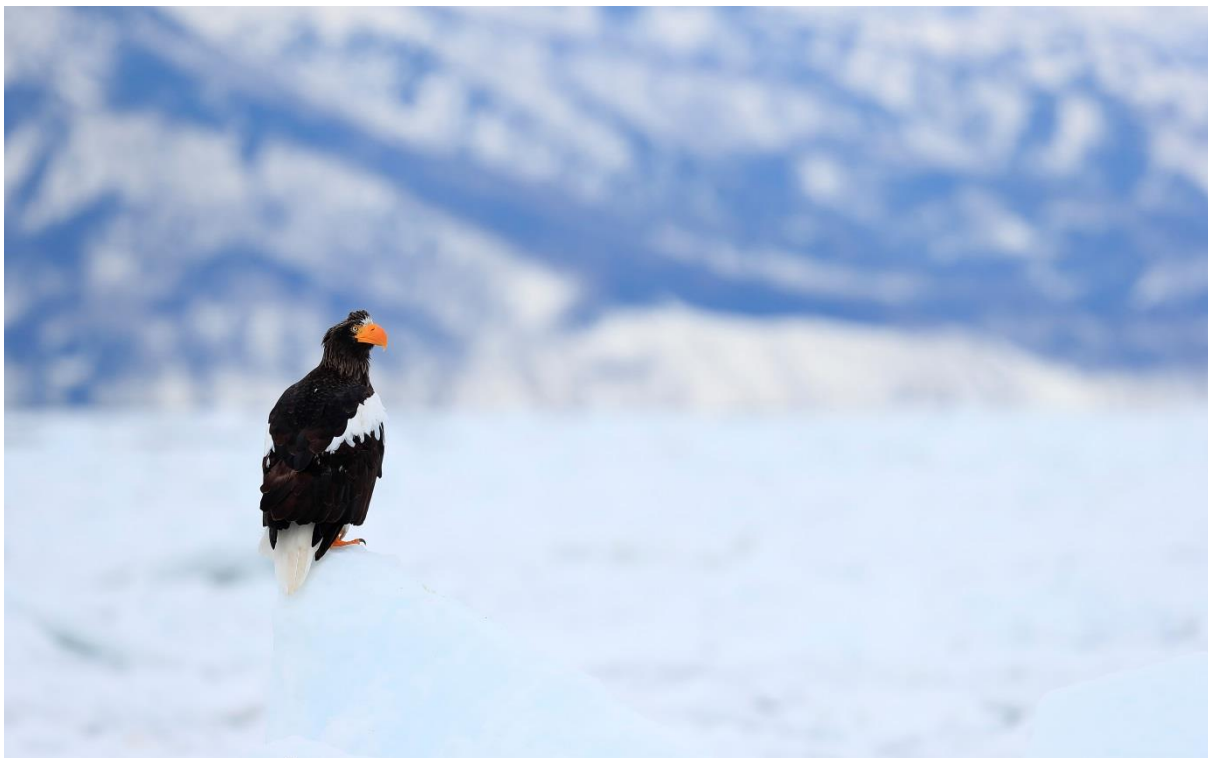
Day 4: Drive to Rausu; afternoon boat cruise

Sunday 16 February 2020

Today we had a relaxed start, leaving the hotel at 9am for the local geothermal highlight of Sulphur Mountain. We had the site to ourselves, with the sun shining and the thermal vents (and sulphurous smells) billowing their steam straight out of the ground.

It was then time to move on once again, heading eastwards towards Hokkaido's coastline and the town of Shibetsu, where we stopped to buy our lunch from a local convenience store. We then continued northwards along the coastline to the town of Rausu, where we would base ourselves for the next couple of nights.

We arrived at the town, and after a quick pit stop, we headed straight to the harbour to go on our first cruise. We were in luck as, the day before, the drift-ice had arrived from the north. It only took around five minutes to reach the ice where one of the most remarkable gatherings of eagles in the world lay before us. Around 100 white-tailed and Steller's sea eagles lay before us, with the boat crew throwing out fish scraps for countless photographic opportunities.



We were also surrounded by hundreds of gulls (slaty-backed and one glaucous), Japanese and oriental crows, and there was also a spectacled guillemot spotted. Around the harbour there were numerous red-breasted merganser, pelagic cormorant and great scaup. As we came into dock, we also had our first sighting of the beautiful harlequin duck.

We returned to the hotel for a short break, enabling the group to download their photos and charge batteries. It was then time to head off to the Washi no Yado fish owl observatory but, on this occasion, we were left waiting with no luck. We accepted that tonight might not be our night, so we headed back to the hotel for our dinner and a well-earned rest. We later heard that the owl didn't show until 4am the following morning.

Today we were meant to leave on a dawn boat trip in search of eagle photography opportunities, but due to some strong winds, the trip was delayed for a couple of hours. We eventually headed out onto the water and were blown away by the number of birds – far more than the day before. There were hundreds of both white-tailed and Steller’s sea eagles all around us, resting on the ice, which was much closer to shore than before. We spent a couple of hours filling our cards with countless birds, from stunning portraits to dramatic action shots as birds squabbled and flew across this winter wonderland. It really was a photographer’s paradise and there was no shortage of photography opportunities for the whole group. Having a dedicated photographic sailing meant that everyone onboard was there to maximise their shots of the birds.

We headed back to shore for lunch at the Shiretoko Shokudo restaurant where we had an excellent meal and warmed up after a particularly chilly morning. It wasn’t long before we headed out onto the water once more for our second afternoon boat trip – this time the birds seemed more active, similar to the morning’s cruise. Once again, photographic opportunities were plentiful and the group got to enjoy some excellent action.



After an action-packed day, we returned to the hotel for another break before trying our luck once again at the fish owl observatory. As we settled into our seats the group was hoping that tonight might be the night we would see the world’s largest species of owl. Within about 40 minutes of darkness falling, we were treated to a brief but wonderful view of an owl as it came to catch a fish from the river. What’s more, the owl returned (or perhaps its partner) for around half an hour and provided numerous opportunities to capture images.

What a remarkable day we’d had, and how blessed we were to have had such cooperative subjects, and the sea-ice to provide the perfect backdrop for the eagles.

What was supposed to be another dawn cruise, turned out to be a post-dawn cruise, although it was still early in the morning. The cloud was not as thick today and it wasn't snowing, but the birds came in their hundreds once again. Slaty-backed gulls, oriental and large-billed (Japanese) crows, as well as the impressive white-tailed and Steller's sea eagles surrounded the vessel as a member of the crew threw fish onto the ice. Having had two successful days out on the boats already, we were able to pick our moments, becoming more fussy with the images we captured. One added bonus of today was that the ice was very close to shore. There was also a lot more sea-ice: it seemed to stretch onwards to the horizon. After some



time locked within the ice, the skipper manoeuvred the boat out into the open water, and a crew member then threw fish into the water, enticing the eagles to snatch the food source from the surface of the water. After a couple of hours filling our memory cards once again, it was time to head back to shore and for our final breakfast at the hotel.

We were soon all packed and ready to head south once more, driving down the coastal road to Shibetsu. Upon arrival in Shibetsu, we spent around an hour exploring the fishing harbour, which was the resting spot for numerous species of wildfowl, including greater scaup, common merganser, red-breasted merganser, black scoter, goldeneye and long-tailed duck. There were also a couple of Steller's sea eagles resting on the ice as we arrived (which later disappeared), and numerous large-billed (Japanese) crows. We then moved on to a local restaurant for a delicious lunch, primarily comprised of tempura and rice.

Next we headed inland for the final time, to the hot spring village of Yoroushi and the traditional and exclusive Yuyado Daiichi Inn.

Upon arrival we were greeted with a welcome drink which we enjoyed while we sat watching the amazing birdlife at the feeders. We were blessed with countless marsh tits, nuthatch, Japanese tit, long-tailed tit, brown-eared bulbul, great spotted woodpecker and the charming Japanese pygmy woodpecker. After settling in to our rooms, we decided to return to the large windows in the hotel lobby to photograph the birds and were surprised when a Japanese sable (a member of the marten family) made an appearance in broad daylight. It was then time to freshen up before returning to the lobby, hoping to glimpse the Blakiston's fish owl which is known to visit a small fish pond here. Within moments of the pond being uncovered, the owl descended for a meal and three Japanese sable also delighted the group with their presence.



We were then treated to yet another traditional gastronomic feast, and were all full after eating the lavish spread of food which was brought in stages over the evening. The setting was beautiful and it was the perfect final evening on the island of Hokkaido. We returned to the lobby, hoping for another view of the owl when an American mink made numerous darting appearances, grabbing fish from the small pond before disappearing into the night.

Some members of the group woke early the next morning and once again managed to see the owl as well as a brown dipper; a hawfinch also made an appearance, just as we were leaving the hotel.

Day 7: Eagle photography at Lake Furen; flight to Tokyo

Wednesday 19 February 2020

It was our final morning on Hokkaido and we headed south-east, towards the coast once more. Our destination this morning was Lake Furen, where a café owner throws fish scraps out onto the frozen lake to feed numerous white-tailed and Steller's sea eagles, as well as a large number of black-eared kites.

We had our first good view of a small group of sika deer out on the frozen lake, just before the feeding frenzy started. I am not sure anyone in the group had ever seen anything quite like it. Literally hundreds of birds descended on the food provided for them. It was a maelstrom of feathers and talons as the birds squabbled for their share. The sight was a little overwhelming and it was difficult to focus on a particular subject with so much going on, but there was the opportunity to capture some birds on the ice from a different angle to the ice off Rausu.



Having been spoiled for the past couple of days, we decided to head off early and see if we could arrange an impromptu visit to the cranes. We made it in time to enjoy about half an hour with the cranes and around 50 whooper swans, an unexpected bonus. It started to snow towards the end of our time there, and it was a lovely way to finish off our time in Hokkaido. It was then time to head to the airport at Kushiro and board our afternoon flight back to Tokyo. We said our goodbyes and passed on our thanks to both Chieko (our local guide) and to the bus driver before heading on through security.



After a very smooth flight to Tokyo, flying along Japan's eastern seaboard, we were greeted and whisked off to our hotel for the evening. The Shinagawa Prince Hotel is situated within easy reach of the train station and is only 25 minutes away from the airport, allowing easy access.

The rest of the afternoon and evening were scheduled as free time for the group, with a plan in place to meet in the hotel lobby at 9am the next day.

Day 8: Tokyo to Yamanouchi

Thursday 20 February 2020

We all met in the hotel lobby for our 9am departure, and headed to Shinagawa Station to catch a commuter train to Tokyo Station. We had missed the worst of rush hour and were able to fit on the train with relative ease, arriving at Tokyo to catch our Shinkansen (bullet train) to the city of Nagano. The train was immaculate, spacious and provided a speedy journey to Nagano, where we were met by our translator/guide and we quickly boarded our bus for Yamanouchi. We stop en route to buy our lunch at a local convenience store and then made our way up into the hills to the delightful Hotel Shibu, situated next to a fast-flowing river and in a charming neighbourhood. The rest of the afternoon was free time, with some of the group deciding to make a brief visit to the Snow Monkey park, while others explored the local streets and walkways.

We reconvened at 7pm for an excellent dinner in the hotel, before retiring to our spacious rooms in anticipation of our day with the snow monkeys. Two members of the group made their way up to the monkey park in the afternoon for a bonus photography session and the macaques had also been seen around town by other members of the group.

Day 9: Visit Jigokudani (Hell's Valley) to see Japanese macaques

Friday 21 February 2020

Today started off with a very impressive Japanese breakfast at 7.30am, before heading off towards the snow monkeys at 8.30am. From where you can get dropped off, it is a 25-minute walk up to the entry point. It is here that there is a thermal pool for the monkeys to bathe in, and there is also an official feeding programme. We were among the very first to arrive and were able to enjoy the monkeys before the crowds

arrived. A couple of youngsters decided to take a plunge, but with unseasonably warm weather, the majority of the monkeys sat close by, keeping warm.



We stayed for several hours, watching and photographing the Japanese macaques as they groomed one another, squabbled and posed for photographs. Although there wasn't an awful lot of snow about, the group was still able to capture some lovely imagery and the time flew by. As the day started to warm up, many of the monkeys climbed the hillsides, enjoying the warm (spring-like) sunshine. One of our group was lucky enough to see and photograph a Japanese serow that came down to a small pond for a drink, before it disappeared.

Our group slowly dispersed as members headed back down the valley for coffee, lunch and a wander in the local streets. The weather was glorious throughout and it was a wonderful final wildlife photography session.

We reconvened in the hotel for our final Japanese dinner, and we were once again presented with a bona fide feast. It wasn't long before our final meal was over and it was time to get a well-earned rest before our final full day in Japan.

Day 10: Visit to Zenko-ji Temple & return to Tokyo

Saturday 22 February 2020

We had a leisurely start with a traditional Japanese breakfast, before heading off to the impressive Zenko-ji Temple on the edge of Nagano. This large temple complex provided a different cultural element to those we'd experienced in Tokyo and Hokkaido, showcasing the splendour of Japan's history. We had a couple of hours at the temple and surrounding town before we headed off to Nagano's train station to catch our shinkansen back to Tokyo.



The trains in Japan really are a marvel and a wonderful way to travel at speed across the Japanese landscape. Before we knew it, we were back in the hustle and bustle of Tokyo and caught the local train from Tokyo Central Station back to Shinagawa, where we would spend our final night.

The group reconvened for a final meal together at a restaurant close to the hotel before saying goodnight and goodbye as the group was splitting up and flying separately the following morning.

Day 11: Fly back to the UK

Sunday 23 February 2020

Three members of the group caught the earlier British Airways flight from Tokyo Haneda Airport, back to London Heathrow, and I bid my farewells as they headed off. I then met the rest of the group at breakfast before meeting in the hotel lobby for our bus back to the Haneda Airport. It was another great flight for the remainder of the group with Japan Airlines and we landed back at Heathrow ahead of schedule. We bid our goodbyes after collecting our luggage, and our inaugural Japan's Winter Wildlife Photography Tour was over.



Checklist



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



16	Eastern buzzard	<i>Buteo japonicus</i>										✓
17	Red-crowned crane	<i>Grus japonensis</i>	✓	✓				✓				
18	Slaty-backed gull	<i>Larus schistisagus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓				
19	Spectacled guillemot	<i>Cephus carbo</i>			✓							
20	Blakiston's fish owl	<i>Bubo blakistoni</i>				✓	✓	✓				
21	Ural owl	<i>Uralensis japonica</i>		✓								
22	Japanese pygmy woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos kizuki</i>					✓	✓				
23	Great spotted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major japonicus</i>					✓	✓				
24	Oriental crow	<i>Corvus corone orientalis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
25	Japanese (large-billed) crow	<i>Macrorhynchos japonensis</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
26	Varied tit	<i>Sittiparus varius</i>		✓								
27	Marsh tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>					✓	✓				
28	Japanese tit	<i>Parus minor</i>		✓			✓	✓				
29	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>					✓					
30	Brown-eared bulbul	<i>Hypsipetes amaurotis</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	
31	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes fumigatus</i>					✓	✓				
32	Eurasian nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>					✓	✓				
33	Brown dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>						✓		✓		
34	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	✓	
35	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>							✓	✓		

36	Japanese wagtail	<i>Motacilla grandis</i>								✓	✓
37	Hawfinch	<i>Coccothraustes coccothraustes</i>						✓			
38	Oriental Greenfinch	<i>Chloris sinica</i>							✓	✓	
	MAMMALS	MAMMALIA									
1	Sika deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>	✓					✓			
2	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		✓	✓	✓					
3	Japanese macaque	<i>Macaca fuscata</i>						✓	✓	✓	
4	Japanese sable	<i>Martes zibellina</i>				✓					
5	American mink	<i>Neovison vison</i>				✓					
6	Japanese serow	<i>Capricornis crispus</i>								✓	



Mammal Species Observed	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10
	✓					✓			
		✓	✓	✓					
						✓	✓	✓	
				✓					
				✓					
								✓	

