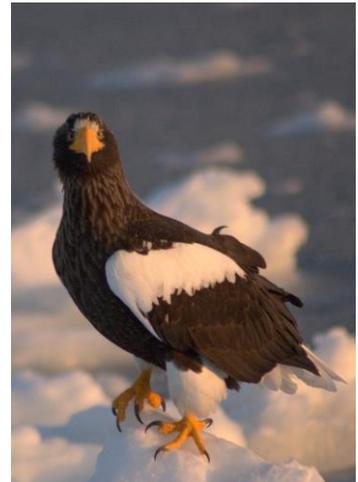


## Japan Winter Wildlife Tour

**Destination:** Japan    **Duration:** 14 Days    **Dates:** 23<sup>rd</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> Feb 2014

-  Finding a pair of rare and elusive Siberian flying squirrels in Hokkaido
-  Expert guidance from Hokkaido's best naturalists Mr. Kuhawara & Mr. Matsuda
-  Watching the superb and beautiful red-crowned cranes and their ritualised dancing
-  Staking out two locations and being rewarded for the world's rarest & largest owl
-  Cruising around the sea ice with around ~200 Steller's & white-tailed eagles!
-  Relaxing with the incredibly photogenic Japanese macaques at their hot spring spa
-  Staying at two of Japan's best and wonderful Ryokans and enjoying their onsens
-  Snow shoeing through Shiretoko National Park's forest and dramatic sea coast
-  Having fantastic views of 4 wild but resident sable at the Yayado Daiichi
-  Walking onto the sea ice and seeing Martin, Steve & Yosuda all taking a cold dip



### Tour Leader / Guides

Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)  
 Dr. Braun (Japanese Naturalist Guide)  
 Mr. Kuhawara (Hokkaido Naturalist Guide & Driver)  
 Mr. Matsuda (Shiretoko Naturalist Guide & Driver)  
 Miss. Sasaki (Shiretoko Hiking Guide)  
 Mr. Endo (Sea ice guide)

### Participants

Mr. Derek Howes  
 Mrs. Sally Howes

### Overview

**Days 1-2:** Tokyo

**Days 3-4:** Akan Cranes

**Days 5-6:** Nakashibestu

**Day 7:** Rausu

**Days 8-9:** Shiretoko NP

**Day 10:** Abashiri

**Days 11-12:** Jigokudani NP

**Day 13:** Tokyo



# Day by Day Breakdown

## Overview

Japan is famous for many things; from massive and pioneering electrical product companies such as Sony, Toshiba, Canon and Samsung to global superpowers of the automobile manufacturing world like Toyota, Honda and Suzuki. The country is also famous for being the only country to have had nuclear weapons used against them and most recently a different kind of nuclear fallout as the Fukushima power plant had a melt down; the reason for this recent nuclear episode being another reason why Japan is often on the radar of foreign news programmes, that is the fact that Japan lies on the fault lines of three tectonic plates. This geological formation results in a huge number of earthquakes (followed by their tsunamis) and volcanoes occurring in Japan; coupled with these natural disasters that always hang over the heads of the 120 million Japanese are the annual typhoons that strike the southern parts of the country. All of these things are well known and associated with Japan but we have not even mentioned sushi, sumo wrestling, anami films, bullet trains and samurais. When you list the things that are known about Japan and recognised as typically Japanese you begin to realise that this is a country and a culture that seems well known in the Western mind set. But as we would find out in the course of this tour; Japan has many secrets and they can be wonderful to discover when explored with knowledgeable guides and a passion for wilderness.

This tour explores Japan that is not seen by the outside world very often, whilst Japan leads the way with technological advances and suffers periodic natural disasters that affect everyone in the country the wildlife up and down this diverse country offers up some of the best natural spectacles in the world. Spanning most of the north eastern Pacific Ocean, Japan suffers from bleak and freezing winters in the north and basks in subtropical heat in the southern islands. This particular tour would be focusing mostly on the northern regions and the winter wonderland of wildlife that is Hokkaido. Hokkaido is the second largest island in Japan and its fauna and flora are shared with the Russian taiga forests that run parallel with northern Japan west all the way to Finland. This very European wildlife is evident in the presence of brown bears, red fox, sable, white-tailed eagles and many other species of smaller birds. Whilst the second island we will be visiting (Honshu – the largest) shares its ecosystem and diversity with Manchuria and the Central Asian species such as Asiatic black bear, raccoon dog, macaques (although the Japanese macaque has been isolated long enough to become its own distinct species) and mountain hawk eagles. A little further south the wildlife of Japan shares characteristics with the Malayan fauna of South East Asia. It is this range of habitats and diversity of wildlife that is found in Japan that makes these islands a haven for wildlife watchers. But the fact that this wonderful wildlife is here is not enough in Japan, during the winter there are some incredible shows that the wildlife puts on in northern Japan and these events have become world famous amongst wildlife photographers. This in turn has led to massive development of the areas that the wildlife congregates and the ethos in Japan towards conservation is feeding. Whilst feeding is largely discouraged or illegal elsewhere around the world, it is the defacto policy in Japan. This may seem controversial or even wrong to a lot of wildlife enthusiasts and to be honest it is a little strange to see these animals attracted by food as opposed to natural behaviour. But this is countered with the fact that many of these species are declining in number throughout the rest of their range (Far Eastern Russia and China) and have stable or increasing populations in Japan. I think that the overriding feeling from most visitors to these sites in Japan is that if the wildlife is feed but not handled and managed by other means; that the numbers remain at least stable or increase; the areas around the feeding sites are developed in an eco-friendly way and that the people coming to see the wildlife are educated in Japanese wildlife, conservation and eco-friendly policies; then the feeding can be deemed necessary.

So it is many of these feeding sites that would be visited on this tour, but we also searched out lesser visited locations and tried our hand at exploring other environments that are not visited on the 'normal' wildlife photography tour groups. By doing this we would be rewarded with even more surprises that Japan has to offer and our overall understanding of Japan's wildlife is all the more fuller for it. Because of the high quality of the local guides used throughout the tour we were able to add sightings of sable and Siberian flying squirrel (misidentified on the tour as the Japanese flying squirrel – which is not found on Hokkaido) to the red-crowned cranes and Japanese macaques as well as walking on the sea ice and having the chance to take a dip; so we could experience the sea ice from the land, ice-breaker and from the ice itself.

All in all we would explore Hokkaido and Central Honshu on the track of some of the world's rarest and most iconic winter wildlife and all the time experiencing a country that has so much to offer to wildlife watchers.





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## Day 1 Tokyo

## Arrival

Today Derek & Sally arrived from London via Seoul in the evening, their flight was on time, which was good because for inexplicable reason Narita international airport (the main airport in the world's largest city) in Tokyo closes at around 11pm! So once they cleared immigration we met up and headed for the last train out of the airport to Shinagawa Station. As Tokyo is a vast city the train took an hour to get to our station and from there the hotel was just over the road. We were in the hotel a little after midnight and after checking in we arranged to meet up for breakfast tomorrow. After a long day of travelling it was time to hit the hay.

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## Day 2 Tokyo

## Sightseeing

Today was a day we set aside to overcome any possible jetlag and to explore some of Tokyo's most iconic sights. As nobody was in the mood for a 3am start today we decided to miss the world famous (or infamous – considering the plight of the blue-fin tuna around the world) Tsukiji fish market and head straight towards Ginza and the incredible shopping centres that put Tokyo on the map during the 80's and 90's. Walking around the designer shops and with Steve taking us into some of the up market food shops we were given an eye opening experience that included £300 steaks, £10 single apples, £25 strawberries (only 6 per pack) and £50 water melons (square ones at that!). How anyone can eat in Japan is remarkable, however Steve explained that this food is for the rich and most people make do with rice and basic vegetables. The main reason for the costly fruit is that Japan cannot compete with other countries in terms of bulk food production, so they have gone down the quality over quantity route and judging by how busy the shops were it seems to be working. We then caught a train to Tokyo station (an iconic and very British style building) and had a short walk to the Imperial Palace. Most of the Palace is not visible from the moat, this was by design and only the roof of the largest building is visible above the trees that line the moat and also surround the palace. But all was not lost as the moat is a good place to see bird life and we spotted a pair of introduced mute swans as well as flocks of greater scaup, common gulls and brown-headed gulls in the moat, we also saw a small group of little grebes, Eurasian teal as well as a single Japanese wagtail and a pelagic cormorant. From here we boarded a train at the iconic Tokyo station and headed to the world's busiest train station Shinjuku. Shinjuku is famous for a couple of things, firstly its markets and we explored some of these before having lunch in a very Japanese restaurant and secondly its shadier sex industry. After this we went back to our hotels and to a nearby restaurant for dinner. Today was a very concise but informative introduction to Japanese culture with food and kimono's taking centre stage in the luxury shops of Ginza. Tomorrow we would leave the ultra-modern metropolis of Tokyo and start our journey into the wilderness of northern Japan.



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## Day 3 Tsurui Village

## Travelling & Wildlife Watching

This morning we had breakfast at 08:30 watching the ducky thrushes in the garden that the hotel restaurant looked out over. We then left via a the train to Haneda airport, our flight was on time but due to a very overcast sky we couldn't see Mt. Fuji as we took off and began the 1.5 hour flight north to Kushiro. On arrival we met Mr. Kuhawara who would be our driver throughout our time in Hokkaido as well as our local guide. He is one of the leading naturalists in Hokkaido and is leading the push to reintroduce wolves into Japan. He owns his own wolves at his wildlife education centre and through his extensive contacts we were able to secure the best rooms at the hotels we stayed at as well as access to some of the country's best guides. We loaded the vehicle up and headed north, the sky in Hokkaido was as clear as a bell, not a cloud in the sky and this would be a sign of things to come. We were blessed with exceptional weather from start to finish. The first place we visited today was the Kushiro Marshes National Park, this is a park north of the city of Kushiro and protects the marsh land which is traditionally the cranes breeding grounds. However during the winter the marshes are completely frozen and that is why the cranes travel to the agricultural lands further north on the outskirts of the national park. They are fed here at at least two locations and we would visit both of these locations in the next two days. From the watch tower at the Kushiro Marshes National Park we were able to see over the marshes and towards the crane feeding grounds in the north. We also had our first view (albeit distant) of a white-tailed eagle from here. The views of the volcanoes were stunning here, these volcanoes occur in the aesthetically breath-taking Akan National Park; these volcanoes (some extinct, some dormant and some active) would be the backdrop to our wildlife watching for the next few days. Our first stop today would be to Otowa Bridge, this is usually where the cranes roost in the river and is one of the best places to see cranes in a completely wild setting. But mostly in the early morning, we would try this area now as we had to drive past and there may be some cranes in the river early. As it was there were not any but we did start to see cranes dotted in the fields along the side of the road as we drove closer to the feeding site at Tsurui village. Many of the



cranes were in the farm yards and on the manure, whether they are getting warmth or some insect life from the manure is unknown but they seem to prefer the manure to the snow covered fields in the farmland. The cranes are tolerated by the farmers for two main reasons, the first is the practical knowledge that most of the agriculture is dairy farming and so the cranes are not in direct competition with the farmers for crops. The second is the fact that the red-crowned crane is regarded as sacred in Japanese culture and many of the older people here do still regard the cranes as a symbol of luck and long life. This belief and the feeding stations (that supplement the cranes diet – not providing the whole diet – during the harsh winter) is what is allowing the crane (and other populations) to increase or at least remain stable in Hokkaido whilst the populations of red-crowned cranes are decreasing in China and Far Eastern Russia. We arrived at the small village of Tsurui where the local farmers feed the cranes at two locations, the first one being very close to the main road and when we arrived we had just missed the feeding and the many cranes had already dispersed, we visited for a little while but other than very sleepy cranes and a pair of noisy brown-eared bulbuls there was not too much else going on. So we went to the larger feeding site and were met with many cranes. The beautiful 1.6m tall cranes striding proudly around in the pristine snow was a site to behold, their stark black legs and back of the neck standing in contrast with the pure white body and then their distinctive red cap. As we watched the cranes interacting with each other (we didn't see much dancing today) large flocks of whooper swans began to fly into the field that the cranes were already in. The swans were being very careful in where to land as the cranes are clearly the dominate bird in this interaction. In fact it was rather strange to see the swans aggregating around the cranes so much and the main reason for this is the bird flu endemic that ravished most of East Asia a few years ago. There was a couple of very large feeding centres in the north of Hokkaido, these marshes used to attract several thousand swans and when bird flu struck they stopped feeding the birds and so they have now dispersed. This has led to most of the areas where the cranes are found also being home to swans now. Whether the swans find being around the larger and quite aggressive cranes safer from the possible attack of eagles or whether the swans just like the open areas that the cranes happen to inhabit we just don't know at the moment. However as we watched the cranes and the eagles interact on day 4 it became apparent that the swans left the area before the eagles started to gather and they came back after the eagles had stopped feeding again. This would seem that the swans are threatened by the eagles and that the cranes provide a safe location to spend some of the day when not foraging; of course the swans will also take some of the food that is provided to the cranes. As we watched the cranes we started to notice that most of the cranes were either in pairs or trios (with single adults being the smallest group); the pairs are mating pairs and as cranes are monogamous these mating pairs may have been together for years. It is their monogamous behaviour that leads to their iconic dancing as this strengthens and solidifies bonds between the male and female for many years to come. The trios are made up of an adult male and female and their offspring from either last season or the season before. Cranes stay with the adults for two years and the bond between them is very strong. It is in these two years that the chicks understand and learn the migration routes, best and safest feeding and roosting locations and of course where they learn the intricate dancing behaviours. The chicks are distinguished by having no black on the neck and primary feathers (the large feathers at the tips of the wings) and instead these areas are yellowish which change to brown in the second year and by the third year the brown is darker and there are black tips to the primaries, then at their fourth year they are in 90% of their adult plumage. This long maturation is a feature of all cranes and is also one of the reasons that cranes live for such a long time. In the case of red-crowned cranes they can live for over 60 years, and in Japan they are regarded as a symbol of long life.

Watching these pairs and trios we counted only 7 chicks (under the age of 3) and from a possible total of around 50 birds this seemed like a small percentage but as the red-crowned cranes breed in a two year cycle and they usually only have one chick that survives to maturation; the total of 7 chicks out of 50 adults is not a bad ratio. When you consider 7 of the 50 are chicks, this leaves 43 mature individuals and the male / female ratio for cranes is roughly 50/50 so this means around 22 mating pairs and if half of these birds are on the first year of their two year breeding cycle then 7 of 11 pairs have chicks and this fits in with a healthy population status. As the sun began to set the cranes began to get restless as they would soon be heading to their roosts, one of these roosts is the river running underneath the Ottawa Bridge. So we left the feeding site and travelled a couple of fields over (in between the feeding site and the roosting river) where it is sometimes possible to see the cranes silhouetted as they fly to their roost past the setting sun. As we waited for the cranes to start flying back we had sightings of Eurasian jays, marsh tits, brown-eared bulbuls as well as the very numerous carrion crows and large-billed crows. These two species of crows are by far the most numerous birds that are easily visible over all of Hokkaido, the carrion crows are most numerous around farms and small villages with the larger large-billed crows being more common overall and out compete the carrion crows at most of the feeding sites and good foraging locations. We waited around here until the sun had set and then we headed back to the hotel for a very nice and bountiful meal. Tomorrow would be a crack of dawn start as we head to the cranes roosting site before they wake up.

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## Day 4      **Akan International Crane Centre**

## *Wildlife Watching*

Today began pre-dawn as we headed down to Ottawa Bridge, when we arrived at the viewing platform built parallel to the bridge, it was very busy. It would seem that many photographers arrive here for the morning shots of the cranes in the river. Some people have camped here all night long in order to get prime position, however we managed to find good places to wait and watch along the bridge. As the sun began to rise we started to see down



onto the river and we could see a flock of around 10 cranes in the river around 60m away from us, further behind were many more cranes and as the sun began to break through and make the river glow with a pale pinkish hue the cranes were all started to get restless. As the sun rose higher they started dancing, with some pairs showing very nice dancing skills. As we watched the cranes feeding in the river and dancing together and the light became too harsh (looking directly into the rising sun) for photography we saw a pair of common mergansers come close to the bridge before drifting down river and away from us as quickly as they had arrived. A Steller's sea eagle also flew overhead, as did some of the cranes as they left for their feeding grounds (probably the Akan International Crane Centre, where we would later today). We then decided to leave and on our drive back to the hotel for breakfast we found many large-billed crows and carrion crows as well as a male and female red fox on a pristine snow covered field. Their wonderful and rich red pelage standing out in stark contrast to the pure white surroundings. They were quite skittish but we could see their long furred coats very well before one disappeared behind farm buildings and the other one gave us a very wide berth. On the rest of the drive Steve told us about the forests that dominate large areas of Hokkaido (and then rest of Japan in general); whilst Japan has a huge percentage of its land covered by forests (~75%) most of these forests are not native trees and are monoculture plantations and the rich and varied plant and animal life that the ancient and primary forests used to support is replaced by very few species and had helped spread some fast growing invasive species such as the shrub sasa. This plant is native to Japan but its coverage is checked by other plants in natural forest, however when these plants are eliminated in the presence of a monoculture forest the sasa plant grows unchecked and most of the roadsides and forest floors were covered in this fast growing plants. We then breakfasted and checked out so we could head to the crane centre and our new hotel, just over the road. On our way there we had great views of a soaring black-eared kite, this species has recently been split from the more common and very similar black kite of Eurasia. When we arrived at the crane centre we had great views (and Derek got pictures) of greater-spotted woodpeckers and brown-eared bulbuls in the car park of the crane centre. We then entered the crane centre and the huge expanse of snow covered ground was full of cranes and their companion whooper swans. There were many juvenile cranes and it was fun to watch them learning the dancing from their parents. Every now and again they would get in the way of the adults and be chased away, only to come back and try and join in again a minute later. Every day at 14:00 the cranes here are fed a few fish, fish make up a part of the cranes natural diet and this protein is very valuable to the cranes during the winter. In fact the red-crowned crane is the most carnivorous of the 15 crane species in the world and this is part of the reason why the conflict with the farmers. But the fish also attracts many eagles, mostly white-tailed eagles but also Steller's sea eagles and smaller black-eared kites and the smaller still large-billed crows and carrion crows. Very early in the day a Steller's sea eagle soared above the field and perched in a tree on the ridge in the distance. Whilst we found a good position for photography we were joined by a 2 year old crane, who came very close to us and posed for several minutes, we also had several fly byes of cranes and whooper swans as they came and went from this field to other nearby fields. We also spotted a very young chick, only being 3 months old (judging by the age charts and its downing neck and yellow-brown colouration on the back of its neck and crown), this chick was born around 6 months late (or 6 months early depending on how you look at it) in the season. The chick seemed to be in good health and no doubt the feeding sites around had helped the adults find enough food in order to raise the chick in the harsh winter. We had some lunch in the centre and then at around 1pm some eagles began to arrive and perch in the nearby trees. As the eagles began to arrive the swans began to leave, not all of them but some of them left, presumably as they feel threatened by the eagles. As the scheduled feeding got closer and close the activity of the cranes increased in intensity and all of sudden a burst of dancing overtook the cranes, it was very hard picking out one of the pairs and focusing on them. Their dancing is mesmerising to watch as they would bow and crane their necks one after the other in perfect synchrony, occasionally they would jump into the air spreading their wings out and raising their feet towards the other bird. This dancing would sometimes go on for just a few seconds and in some pairs maybe 3-4 minutes, all to help strengthen their bonds. This is important as they breed for life and their chicks require a long time of parental protection and feeding, so the bond between the male and female needs to be strong. Some of the pairs would pick up snow and through it up in the air, one also started doing this with a small stick, repeatedly picking it up and throwing it and then collecting and throwing it again. Whether this is some way of learning the dance, a part of the dance or just playful behaviour we were unsure and we have struggled to find any information on this strange behaviour. Then as the dancing was beginning to calm down again a pair of the cranes in the middle of the flock mated, this brief copulation was finished with a flurry of wings and legs from the two mating cranes and then they settled down with the rest of the flock to wait for the feeding to begin. Once the fish came out the eagles and kites came out of the trees very quickly, some of the cranes grabbed the fish but many of the fish were taken by the swooping and diving white-tailed eagles and black-eared kites. A red fox also came in and snatched a fish before running away, but it was the eagle and the cranes that were taking centre stage now, the cranes trying their best to get to the fish before the eagles came rushing in and when the eagles were too close to the cranes, the cranes would jump with their feet outstretched trying to scare the eagles off. The whole show of swooping eagles being mobbed by cranes on the ground and chased by other eagles in the skies, kites skilfully avoiding many cranes and eagles to weave between them and grab left over bits of fish and cranes feeding, dancing and calling excitedly all lasted around 15 minutes. Then all of the fish were taken and that was that, the eagles went back into the trees at the far side of the field and the cranes began to settle down again, swans began to fly back to the field and we decided to get out of the cold and have a hot onsen bath before dinner. Dinner tonight was at a lodge located up some rural roads behind our hotel, we would have stayed here but if there was an snow



during the night then this road would be closed and we would be stuck without access to the cranes. As it was we were ok to get to the lodge for dinner but we didn't want to risk booking this lodge in advance in case it was inaccessible. The food was fantastic and the company of Mr. Tanaka (the lodge owner) brilliant and on the way back we tried to find an Ural owl nest along the road, however we didn't manage to find it, we did hear the owls calling a long way off from the nest site, so they would not have been in the nest even if we had managed to find them. We then retired to our rooms and prepared for more wildlife viewing and photography tomorrow.



## Day 5 Nakashibetsu

## Wildlife Watching

This morning after breakfast we met Steve and Mr. Kuhuwara and headed over the road for one last morning with the red-crowned cranes. There were less here than when we arrived yesterday afternoon however some of the cranes had appeared to roost here over night and many were still asleep. There were no swans here (presumably they spend the night in water) but there were many carrion crows and large-billed crows around and a much higher percentage of juvenile cranes to the adults than yesterday. This is probably because the best roosting sites (in the rivers) are taken up by the adults and also the juveniles (having a higher metabolic rate as they grow and develop) maybe here taking advantage of the early morning feed. As we set up this morning a red fox patrolled the far side of the field and a Steller's sea eagle perched in a faraway tree as well as a pair of willow tits feeding nearby. They seems to take it in turns to come in from the bushes that make the border of this field to pick up some grain (left over from the feeding of the cranes) and then away again into their bushes. A little way back from where most of the cranes were we spotted a pigeon carcass, there were many crows around the carcass and we could see that most of the flesh had been taken from the carcass. It was interesting that the fox just passed by (although it could have been the foxes kill who has had its fill) and the eagles were not here feeding on the carcass. Only the crows were picking the bones clean. The cranes also seemed to ignore the carcass despite scavenging being part of their diet. However just before we left this morning we did see one of the juvenile cranes take an interest in the carcass although it didn't seem to eat anything. The couple of hours we spent here this morning were pretty good, we had a couple of good dancing sessions from the cranes and then a white-tailed eagle came down to look at the carcass but took off again without taking the remains. We left at around 09:30am and headed further north towards the small town of Nakashibetsu and to our accommodation for the night. Along the way Martin spotted a red fox feeding on a sika deer carcass on the side of the road, almost certainly road-kill. As the mist started to rise higher and higher we found a crane wandering along a farm road, seemingly lost and then also a red fox hunting voles or mice that spend the winter under the snow in a matrix of tunnels. The fox stand very still using their very good hearing to listening for the scurrying of these animals underneath the snow. They then locate the sound and pounce high and hopefully land on the animal and disable it with their front paws. We didn't see any pouncing but we watched the fox's big triangular ears swivelling to try and locate a likely food source. To get to Nakashibetsu we had to cross through the pristine Kushiro National Park, in here we saw many sika deer, including young fawns on their mothers. Kushiro National Park is mostly lowland marsh with the Kushiro River flowing through the area, so the vegetation here is richer than in the new monoculture plantations of forest that have sprung up everywhere in Hokkaido in the last 50 years. One of the first animals we saw was actually a pair of red-necked cranes, however unlike all of the other ones we had seen this pair was in their traditional habitat and not taking advantage of feeding sites of farm land for food and warmth. These two cranes seen in the long grass and morning mist was a great way to end our time with the cranes in southern Hokkaido and as we carried on we found Eurasian nuthatches, Japanese tits (a sympatric species to the great tit), willow tits, many sika deer and common goldeneye before we had left Kushiro National Park. We drove around the beautiful frozen lakes of Otoro and Shauroto, on the latter where small tents and people ice fishing. We then made it towards a train track to wait for the steam engine to come pass, this is one of only 2 working steam trains still in commission in Japan and with the cold winter air and snow covered backdrop it was a photograph opportunity we couldn't refuse. Whilst finding the best spot for the train and then whilst waiting for the train we found many Steller's sea eagles perching in a few trees, presumably there is a carcass hidden in the small woods around here. Or they were waiting for the train to hit a deer, this kind of anticipatory behaviour has been recorded from raptors and crows around the world and this could have been an example of it. The trees they were in were not great for roosting and there was no water bodies around here. So waiting for a deer to unwittingly get hit by a train or feeding on a deer carcass from a past train strike seem to be the most reasonable explanation or this group of Steller's sea eagles and crows. After the train came and we got some pictures we had lunch in the town of Otoro, in a local ramen restaurant, before heading onto our accommodation, the wonderful and luxurious Yayudo Daiichi Ryokan. Mr. Kuhuwara knows the owner here and had managed to secure the best room in the whole resort, the only one with its own private hotspring bath. This lodge is not only regarded as one of Japan's best for



relaxation, traditional Japanese food and culture but there is a small stream that runs past the resort and over the years a pair of breeding Blakiston's fish owls visit to feed on some fishes that the chef here leaves out for them. This is one of only around 20 breeding pairs of this owl in the whole of Japan and with only around 2,000 of them in the world they are not only the world's largest (by weight – as the great grey owl is taller) it is the rarest owl too. Whilst the owls do not visit every night this place is regarded as the best place in the world to see the owl and with large windows overlooking the stream (and some bird feeders) it is a great place to stay warm, relax and watch for wildlife. We have to nights here and hope for a visit from this elusive owl. After settling into the rooms we set up our cameras (including a camera trap outside overlooking the feeders) next to the window and began our stake out. We were quickly greeted with many willow tits, Japanese tits, Eurasian jays (we had never seen so many Eurasian jays in one place before), Eurasian nuthatches and brown-eared bulbuls. We also had a very quick and brief sighting a sable heading underneath some decking nearby to the feeders. The sables here are much paler than their Russian cousins, they are the same species but are not the typical sable colour that gives the animals their name. For some reason they are more yellow and very pale in comparison, this had led to some confusing identifications as the Japanese marten, however when looking at the sables here well (which we were able to do as they became very friendly and fed enthusiastically in the open throughout the mornings, evenings and night) you can see their distinctive triangular shaped head, small rounded eyes, beady black eyes, short tail and smaller size. All of these features very characteristic of sable as opposed to Japanese martens. Plus the fact the Japanese martens are not native to Hokkaido and have only recently been introduced to the south-east of the island, traditionally it is the sable (which has come to Hokkaido from the northern Kuril Islands and the large Russian wilderness island of Sakhalin Island to the north of Hokkaido) that is the dominate mustelid species for Hokkaido. As the sun set we had dinner (a very filling Japanese traditional feast) and then set out to stake the owls (we all stayed up until around 22:00 when Martin took a shift until midnight and then Steve took over until around 02:30am before calling it a night. The owls did not show tonight and they do not snow every night. They started to utilise the stream near the onsen when the chefs started keeping the trout (used in the cooking) we kept fresh by placing them in cages in the stream, well the owls quickly figured out this food source and started to supplement their diet with the easy fish here. Soon after this the onsen owners decided to pen their fish in seal cages that allow water from the stream to flow through but stop the owls and the sables from getting the fish. However every night they still place a few fish in the open cages and the onsen has become one of the best places in the world to see this incredible owl. They are usually monogamous and mated pairs will fiercely defend a good territory, one with good stream access year around and a bountiful fish supply. We do not know exactly how long they live for, but most large owls can be long lived and it is likely that the same mating pair have been coming to the onsen for over 20 years now. Because they are territorial and form strong bonds with each other they are very vocal and often the best way of pinpointing the owls in the trees that line water ways is by listening to their booming hoo-hoo dueting call. The males and females calling a note each that to the untrained ear sound like just one bird. The call is very low pitched and carries a good distance through the cold air, making it a very good means of long distance communication for a bird that rarely comes into contact with another of its species (outside of its mated pair and their chicks. But there were no sightings tonight and other than the four sables (the mating pair and their offspring from last year) it was a very quiet night.

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## Day 6 **Nakashibetsu**

## *Wildlife Watching*

Early this morning Martin rose and went to the viewing windows and found Eurasian jays, brown-eared bulbuls, sable, Japanese tits and greater-spotted woodpecker and a bird that was very high on Derek's wish list a hawfinch. So Martin went up to Derek's room and told him the good news. A hawfinch was coming and feeding from the feeders right outside the window and we managed to get great shots of this bird along with the other species here. We also spotted a Hokkaido squirrel on the opposite side of the stream, this is a grey subspecies of Eurasian red squirrel we have in the UK. At breakfast we spotted a brown dipper feeding in the stream and a white-tailed eagle showed up in the trees above the stream, the sable became noticeably nervous once the eagle showed up. They would spend less time in the open and more time around the safety of the decking area (where they can run underneath quickly) looking up at the trees. At around 10:00am the jays also quieted down and then the next shift took over many willow tits and Japanese tits came in and took over the feeding. The sables also picked their activity levels up and presumably the eagle had taken off too. We then departed the onsen and headed to Mr. Kuhuvara's house, he runs the only wolf education centre in Japan and is at the forefront of trying to reintroduce wolves to Hokkaido. He keeps a small pack of wolves at his property and has a wooded area where they spend the spring, summer and autumn. However there is so much snow that they would be able to walk out over their 3m tall fences (the snow getting that high) during the winter, so they are kept in cages during the winter. But they are kept to help show children and other Japanese people that the wolf is not a species to be mindlessly scared of and also educate the local people about the ecological benefits of having wolves around. He also keeps several horses, dogs and a breeding pair of golden eagles. All of which are used for his wildlife education classes, however it is the wolves that are his love and this is the reason behind the wonderful working relationship that Steve and Mr. Kuhuvara have. Once we arrived we were introduced to some of his animals and his wife and then taken to his lodge, the lodge is his lecture hall and guest house and is built in the middle of the wooded area that outside of winter the wolves inhabit in a functioning pack. Here we had a fantastic BBQ with locally caught sika deer, chicken and the very rich and world famous Wagoo steak, we then finished the BBQ with soba ramen (or buck wheat noodles). After lunch



we then headed to Kussharo Lake, this is a large caldera lake that has hot springs entering the lake at certain points along the shoreline. These areas of water remain open all year around and are home to large flocks of whooper swans. The lake is located at the base of Akan Volcano and the views out over the volcanoes and mountains in Akan National Park were incredible and once we arrived where the swans were the pictures against the mountainous and volcanic backdrop was just stunning. At the lake there were plenty of swans and they were also very accommodating to us as we were able to get within 40cm of some of the swans as we sat quietly and observed and photographed them in their icy world. We then travelled up to the rim of the caldera and to a view point, however the weather up here was brutal, with very strong winds and the snow being blown around forming a mini wipe out. It was real Arctic conditions and we didn't stay outside here for very long, we saw the incredible view out over the blown away cone of the volcano and the lake that now lies there before heading back down the rim of the volcanic crater and towards the accommodation. We saw a hunting red fox before a stunning sunset against the mountains of Akan National Park and then once we returned we had dinner before setting up for our shifts again in hope of seeing a Blakiston's fish owl. The sables were active all night and nothing else when Martin ended his shift at midnight and Steve took over. Then at around 12:20 Steve called Martin as the owls had been heard towards the end of the onsen that Martin was staying in, in fact Martin could see and hear the owls just on the opposite side of the stream, perched on the tree. They were perched together and were absolutely enormous, their booming hoo-hoo calls echoing through the forest at night. Martin then calls Derek & Sally's room and also went down to knock on the door when he didn't get an answer. Then we heard that the owls had moved to the other end of the onsen and close to Derek & Sally's room, after Derek awoke we focused on this side of the hotel, but there were no further sightings. However in the morning we would learn that the owls had been perched just next to Derek & Sally's room at some point during the night. As this was our last night here we would try another location tomorrow night that also has a good reputation for Blakiston's fish owls and hope for better luck.



## Day 7 Rausu

## Travelling & Wildlife Watching

Today we left Nakashibetsu at 09:00am after breakfast and headed north towards the east coast of Shiretoko Peninsula and Shiretoko National Park. This is by far the most remote and wild part of Japan and with no roads that penetrate into the park the whole peninsula is left to the wildlife and the park is home to one of the world's highest density of brown bears in the world as well as over 10,000 sika deer. Whilst here we would explore both sides of the peninsula in search of the incredible and diverse wildlife that inhabits here during the winter, both sides of the peninsula have very different eco-tourism philosophies. Firstly the eastern side (Rausu) the philosophy is to try and make as much money as possible and like elsewhere in Japan there is a real push to feed and supplement the wild animals so they sightings can be guaranteed and due to this the numbers of wildlife is increasing or at least remaining stable on the east coast of Shiretoko. Utoro on the western side of the peninsula as the approach of let the wildlife be and see what happens, from a personal point of view Martin prefers the let wildlife be approach however the results (sightings, local interest and increasing numbers) of the utilisation method cannot be argued with. As we drove towards Shiretoko we had stunning views of the peninsula, the rugged coastline stretching north-east and towards the Russian Kuril Islands. These islands are still a hotbed of political tension as both the Japanese and Russians lay claim to them. However currently the islands are internationally recognised as being Russian territories. We first visited the harbour to confirm our early morning cruise tomorrow and Derek, Sally and Martin walked around the harbour to check out the marine birdlife. The harbour was full of slaty-backed gulls, common gulls and veega gulls with a handful of glaucos gulls (juveniles only – we didn't see any adults) a one young glaucos gull; also around the harbour were large flocks of harlequin ducks (although we didn't see any males in their magnificent blue breeding colours), greater scaup, common mergansers, goosanders and pelagic cormorants. We then went for a drive up the road to the end of the road (at the beginning of the national park) and looking into the very productive Nemuro Strait we found many more harlequin ducks (including a male in full blue breeding plumage) and some northern pintails. There were some Steller's sea eagles perched in trees lining the hills that mark the interior of the peninsula. There was some sea ice around as we looked out towards the ocean and we hoped to see many Steller's sea eagles on the sea ice tomorrow morning. As for now we headed to the end of the road as the far side of Rausu town and feeding in the snow of the slope we found a few sika deer before turning around to find a restaurant for lunch. On the way we found a largha seal spy hopping at the surface before it dived to carry on feeding, the marine ecosystem here (at least the coastal region) is dominated by one of the most productive ecosystems in the world, bull kelp forests. The seals here are competing with the local fishermen for sea urchins and other shellfish. This competition has already seen the near extinction of sea otters here and only vagrants from further north are ever seen here now. Other targeted resources are kelp fronds and a local fish called hokki, which is what we tried at lunch today. After lunch we went to check out where we would come tonight for our last shot at the Blakiston's fish owl, it looked a lot more artificial (in terms of the set up), with more cameras and



carefully designed feeding area, this is definitely a place more targeted to photographers and so we hoped to get a shot or at least a sighting of this incredible bird. After this we went back to the hotel for a quick dinner before coming back to the owl location, we waited for a little while and then at around 18:50 a female showed up. There was no calling and she just glided in from the forest behind our staked out location, she perched on a tree overlooking the feeding pool, before heading down onto the snow. These owls are very comfortable on the ground and often form small trails from a perching tree to a good fishing location, it is this reason that Blakiston's is at serious threat from cars. She stayed for around 15 minutes, she didn't feed and to be honest looked quite stressed, there was a very large group of photographers closer to the owl than we were and they were not particularly quiet of obeying the rules (in terms of getting too close and in general not respecting the owl), so we decided to leave after this sighting. We also had a 5am start tomorrow morning in order to get out to the sea ice before sunrise. But we did get the Blakiston's fish owl and it was also Derek's birthday today. So we were all pleased that we were able to get a good sighting of the world's largest and rarest owl for his birthday present.



## Day 8 Shiretoko National Park

## Wildlife Watching

This morning we started pre-dawn and headed to the harbour before boarding the sightseeing boat. We then departed and headed out into the Nemuro Strait between Hokkaido and the Kuril Islands, we were searching for the sea ice and the roosting sites of Steller's sea eagles and white-tailed eagles. Why they choose to spend the freezing night out on the ocean and not in more sheltered trees just 3km away on the peninsula is unknown. The reason they stay around at dawn is obvious as the fishermen here have an arrangement with the eagles and feed them by catch. This has enabled the fishermen to earn money outside of the main fishing season by showing tourists the eagles here. The morning conditions were beautiful with a Beaufort 1.5 which after around 45 minutes changes to a Beaufort 0/0.5 which was just glorious conditions to spend time on the water. We positioned the boat in the sea ice and were surrounded by birds, we had around 200 Steller's sea eagles, around 50 white-tailed eagles and dozens of carrion crows, large-billed crows and gulls (mostly vega gulls and a few glaucous-winged gulls). We spent the next 2.5 hours in the sea ice watching the eagles fight amongst themselves and with the other species of eagles as they competed for the fish being thrown by the fishermen. Watching the sunrise over the Kuril Islands and silhouette the Steller's sea eagles as they perched on the larger pieces of drift ice. Watching the interactions with the different species of birds it became very obvious that there is a strict hierarchy with the carrion crows firmly at the bottom followed by large-billed crows, slaty-backed gulls & vega gulls, glaucous-winged gulls and then the raptors, starting with black-eared kites who are submissive to white-tailed eagles and then top of the pile are the gigantic and beautiful Steller's sea eagles. Whilst this was the general dominance order it became apparent that the incoming bird (the bird that is approaching another bird that already had the food or perch) had dominance over the stationary bird, this was not just an intra-species dominance but also an inter-species dominance. When a smaller white-tailed eagle came and landed on a perch that was occupied by a Steller's sea eagle the Steller's sea eagle would fly away without confrontation. This makes sense because the bird flying in is in a much better position to do harm to the stationary bird and despite not necessarily being larger or more powerful they can outcompete the other bird due to the fear of injury the stationary bird has. Whilst inter-species dominance like this happened a couple of times it was mostly evident when Steller's sea eagles displayed other Steller's sea eagles. All of the fights were quick and usually without major incident, again this is understandable as eagles would not want to risk injury to themselves by having big fights with other eagles who are more than capable of severely injuring each other. Another fascinating behaviour we saw was courtship from a pair of white-tailed eagles in the distance, the female flying high into the sky with a fish to be pursued by the male who then locked his talons with hers and they fell spiralled down to the sea but unlocked and fly back up again. The female then let go of her fish and dived down to catch it but the male grabbed it first and away they went in the distance. One further behaviour we could witness easily was that when a Steller's sea eagle got a fish it would make a multiple note high pitched call into the sky. This seems like a dominance display to show other eagles (both Steller's and white-tailed eagles) but its true reason is not known. The call is not fully developed in juveniles and although they try and imitate the call it would appear that the call has something to do with maturation. We then left the sea ice and started to head back to the Rausu and the wind was picking up to a Beaufort 2 and then a 3. We then returned to the hotel for a late breakfast and checked out at around 09:45am, from here we headed south along the coast as the direct road over the mountains to the other side of Shiretoko is not open during the winter. Instead we travelled to the end of the peninsula and then across to the town of Shari, passing over the peninsula we saw the forest that spreads for miles and miles to the tip of the peninsula. This is true wilderness and one of the few places where wolves could be reintroduced in Japan, as it is the hundreds of bears, thousands of deer and many other species make up the fauna of Japan's largest wilderness area. There was some snow fall as we passed the hills and descended to the other side and once we



got within sight of the ocean the frozen sea was clear for everyone to see. The ice was thick here and the whole sea (as far as we could see) was frozen solid. It is an eerie thing to see the white and motionless sea and we headed towards it, scanning the occasional open body of water in the ice. As we drove north on the western side of the peninsula we could see the habitats from the kelp rich beaches to the high alpine meadows all within 1 kilometre. This is part of the reason that the density of brown bears here is over 4 times as dense as in Yellowstone; and the range of habitats (all perfect for bears and very rich in food) being all very close is exceptional and the views of the sea cliffs and forests with imposing mountains beyond were stunning. Driving along the coast to our accommodation we drove through the coastal oak forests, another good bear habitat that is rich in acorns that help the bears put on their hibernating weight. As we entered Utoro (the largest town in the western peninsula and similar to Rausu) we drove past Okshinishin waterfall, this is a hot spring waterfall and it remains unfrozen year around. Once we entered the town we visited the UNESCO World Heritage information centre (Shiretoko National Park had only recently (2012) gained World Heritage status), we then drove up to the end of the road and to the visitor centre at the gateway to Shiretoko National Park. The views as we drove higher and higher to get to the entrance of the parks got better and better and the extent of the frozen sea all the more impressive. We then headed to the hotel and checked in, the hotel offering incredible views out over the frozen sea and harbour with all of the fishing boats lined up in dry docks waiting the sea ice to melt and disperse so that the fishing season can begin again. We also made the most of the rooftop hot spring baths with equally beautiful views, before Mr. Kuhuwara took us back to the view point near the entrance to the park to try and get sunset shots but it was very cloudy and the sunset was not what we hoped for. So we had a large dinner at the very fine buffet at the hotel and prepared for a day of winter exploration on land and sea tomorrow.

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## Day 9 Shiretoko National Park

## Wildlife Watching

This morning we headed out at around 8:45am and met with Mr. Matsuda and his team, Mr. Matsuda is one of the most experienced naturalists in Japan and his team are very knowledgeable. After being briefed on the area and the wildlife that we would be trying to see today in Mr. Matsuda's office we left with Miss. Sasaki who would guide us on a snow-shoeing walk through the forests and towards the rugged and impressive sea cliffs overlooking the frozen sea. We had also arranged with Mr. Matsuda that he would come with us to Abashiri tomorrow and show us some wildlife watching locations along the way, hoping to find some new species and maybe a rare and very elusive Siberian flying squirrel. Mr. Matsuda had found a nest hole and as flying squirrels are quite a habitual species we hoped to get a sighting of this very seldom seen species as they emerged from their hole in the evening tomorrow. He also told us that last night he had heard a pair of Blakiston's fish owls close to his office and that if we wanted we could try and see one tonight. Once we got our snow shoes on we headed out into the forest, walking on 1.5m of snow we could clearly see the different forest types here. Firstly the traditional primary forest which is rich in diversity and then the monoculture which is slowly but surely taking over the primary forest, the exact long term impact of the change in the forest structure is unknown but the huge deer population here is beginning to take its toll on the forest. They eat most of the vegetation on the ground and ravish the bark from tree and eventually the tree dies. The impact of this kind of feeding was evident as we walked through the forest, many dead trees littered the forest and most caused by deer overfeeding. There was also many different tracks in the snow including sable, mountain hare, sika deer and red fox we also found scratch marks in the trees from brown bears. Whilst it is commonly accepted and understood that adult brown bears do not climb trees in the States there is clear evidence of brown bears (very large ones) climbing very high into the trees to feed on berries and pine nuts. The reasons why they do this here and not elsewhere in their range is not quite understood but there are rewards for the bears that do climb the trees here as there are many berries that grow high in the trees, such as the very productive mountain grape that grows in vines hanging from many of the birch trees. Some of the scratches on the trees were over 50 years old and they show a rich bear culture along the coastal forests of this part of Shiretoko National Park. We made it to a clearing in the forest and walked towards the frozen sea and found fresh fox scat and a little further along we found a half-eaten carcass of a small black sea bird, the diagnostic features of the bird were lost but it looked most like an auk or guillemot. As we stood on the top of the cliffs and looking north along the peninsula we saw a red fox walking across the clearing in full view. The fox crossed over the clearing and disappeared into the forest and heading further north. We carried on south and back into the forest, where we found some grazing sika deer including a young fawn, as we carried on walking through the forests we found many more sika deer and some of which allowed us to get very close and get great close up photographs. Miss. Sasaki also showed us fresh holes from black woodpeckers and we had a brief glimpse of a Japanese pygmy woodpecker flying overhead. We then came to an inlet with a frozen waterfall on the far side of the cliff, some of the water still running behind the wall of ice. Along the edges of the forest and down onto the steep cliffs was a small herd of sika deer, the deer preferring to risk falling so that they can feed on exposed vegetation that grows on the steep cliff sides that do not have snow accumulating on it. We were able to get so close to the deer here (less than 10m away from them) and see their wonderfully rich fur and large eyes it is hard to think of them as a huge destructive army that is destroying the ecosystem here in a way that we do not understand. What makes this even more frustrating is that Mr. Kuhuwara has the answer as a small pack of wolves reintroduced here would reduce the deer population to a sustainable level (a level that is completely natural and the norm until wolves were eradicated here in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Coming out of the primary forest that hugs the coast and on our way back to the visitor centre and our car we walked



through the plantation and the sun shining through the linear trunks all planted in regimented rows did give great patterns in the snow and we stopped for some pictures, we also noticed a couple of rounded mounds in the snow and it is likely that these are bear dens and that there are hibernating brown bears beneath our feet as we walked towards the vehicle. We then left Shiretoko National Park and headed to a café close to the harbour in Utoro, after saying bye to Miss Sasaki we would have lunch and then meet our next local guide today Mr. Endo. Mr. Endo was an intern who came over to Yellowstone and worked with Steve, he is also a fisherman here but during the winter when the sea is frozen he has found a new way of making a living. So after we met him we went to his office and changed into dry suits, these dry suits will keep us warm and dry for when we walk on the sea ice this afternoon. We then walked out on the harbour and out through the harbour walls and into the open ocean, walking all the way was a surreal experience and looking back at the coastline from the sea was amazing. We walked a little way out to into the sea and noticed how uneven the ice fields were, the sea underneath being blown by the wind and currents making the ice break and refreeze in different and jagged shapes. Whilst we were out here the snow started to fall and coming south from the tip of the peninsula it quickly enveloped us in a whiteout. The feeling of being out on the frozen sea and in a snow storm was amazing and something akin to the early polar explorers. As we started to head back Mr. Endo decided to show us what the sea is like underneath the ice, he broke through the ice and slowly sunk lower and lower into the water until he was up to his shoulders underneath the ice. At this point both Steve, Mr Kuhuvara followed by Martin also gave this a go. Getting in (by wiggling and putting pressure on the ice beneath your feet) was far easier than getting out, that can only be described as like watching a walrus trying to get out of a swimming pool. But get out we did and then Mr. Endo, Mr. Kuhuvara and Martin went into a larger area of open water, the ice here was only around 10cm thick (compared to around 30cm where we just broke through) and we tried to find the sea angel (or gymnosomata), this very cute and colourful swimming sea slug. They are gastropod molluscs (like snails) but shaped like an angel with wings that they use to power through the sea ensnaring plankton. We couldn't find any and it was getting very cold now with the snow and wind picking up so we headed back to the office and we were helped out of our dry suits. Getting out of them was easier than getting into them, whilst this is not strictly wildlife watching we did see a pair of northern ravens (one of only around 10 pairs in the whole of Japan – all of them in northern Hokkaido) on a rocky island near the harbour; but even the ravens aside this was a thoroughly enjoyable experience and one that is just not available anywhere else. We then came back to the hotel and warmed up before dinner and then after dinner we met with Mr. Kuhuvara to try and see if the Blakiston's fish owls would show up in the place that Mr. Matsuda told us about. We waited a while but the snow was still falling heavily and we couldn't see or hear anything (other than a red fox that approached Mr. Kuhuvara quite close), so we called it a night and prepared for our last full day in Hokkaido tomorrow.



## Day 10 **Abashiri**

## **Wildlife Watching**

This morning we left at 09:00am when we met with Mr. Matsuda and headed south and out of the peninsula and west along the coast to the largest town in the area, Abashiri. This is a major harbour town and where we would have an ice-breaker cruise to try and find sea birds and seals on the ice. But as we drove along the coast the sea ice became less and less abundant on the water, around the peninsula the sea ice was thick all over the coast but the wind was driving the ice away from Abashiri so we didn't hold out much hope of much ice breaking tomorrow. But for today we had the expertise of Mr. Matsuda as we searched for birds long the way, we were also going to try for the rare and seldom seen Siberian flying squirrel in a forest around Abashiri. All in all we were very lucky and glad to have Mr. Matsuda with us today. Before we left Utoro we found a large seal in the frozen harbour, the harbour has a small opening of water and he had this area all to himself. We watched as the seal ate a large fish before carrying on along the main road. Along the way we were shown various policies installed to help improve wildlife-human interactions. Firstly there is a large fence that runs all the way along the road and funnels the sika deer (and other wildlife) towards specially built tunnels underneath the roads. They even have special one way gates back from the road to the forest for any animals that find a way out of the fence. This has dramatically decreased the number of road accidents caused by deer and wildlife and also allows the wildlife access to the rich and productive beaches and coastline. Another example of wildlife management around urban areas are the perches built onto the top of the electrical pylons. This stops the birds from being electrocuted as well as from the birds building nests and damaging the lines and the third structure was the presence of mesh nets that are built either side of bridges that are built over small streams. This is to stop the Blakiston's fish owls from flying low over the roads as they follow the stream, this low flying can cause them to be hit by cars and other vehicles and the nets push the owls higher and out of danger. We also stopped at the Oshinkin waterfall for photographs of this steaming water fall surrounded by a wall of ice and snow. We also briefly visited a deer farm, here they take a quota of deer from the wild for food and their hides. This is one of the management policies they employ here to reduce the



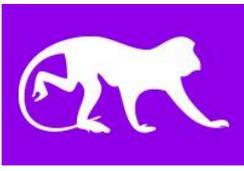
population of deer and their negative impact on the forest, they use the deer for food as well as an annual hunting season but all of this could be solved by a couple of packs of wolves to be reintroduced. The snow was beginning to fall very thickly now and the visibility was very low as we left the peninsula and headed along the coastline, it began to clear up a little and we started to look for bird species. We had nice views of black-eared kites, eastern spot-billed ducks, mallard, black-necked grebe, common goldeneye, eastern buzzard and a couple of common pochard. We also found the tracks and hole where a red fox had hunted for a vole or some other rodent. We then visited a couple of salt marshes that used to be home to thousands of whooper swans, they were fed here and the spectacle was incredible, then once bird-flu broke out the authorities stopped the feeding (to prevent a spread of bird-flu from killing a huge percentage of the population); this is why we had been seeing swans throughout the island of Hokkaido, showing up in unusual places such as the crane feeding grounds. There were not thousands of swans here today but there were a few as well as a large flock of northern pintails, common goldeneye, veega gulls, slaty-backed gulls, glaucous gulls and even a pair of red-crowned cranes. They are very rare here and in fact Mr. Matsuda had never seen cranes here in marsh during winter before. We then arrived at the town of Abashiri and at the harbour found a juvenile Steller's sea eagle being mobbed by gulls before we had lunch in the town. Then after lunch we went to see if we could see the endemic subspecies of Eurasian red squirrel in a nearby forest, despite dozens of tracks we couldn't find a squirrel although we did see a red fox, willow tits, brown-eared bulbuls, great tits, Eurasian nuthatch, white-tailed eagle and carrion crows. We also visited the Siberian flying squirrel hole and there was a small collection of wildlife photographers already here, this is where we found that a local newspaper had recently written an article about the squirrels here and since then a small number of wildlife photographers were coming here hoping to see one of the country's most elusive species. We left as we had a couple of hours before sunset and when the flying squirrels are usually active. So we visited an area where we hoped to see some largha seals on the sea ice, they use this area during the winter, but the wind had blown all of the sea ice away from here. Meaning that the seals now had open water access across this part of the coastline, so we didn't see any seals and headed straight back to the forest. Once we arrived we were told that we had just missed two squirrels coming out of their hole and flying down and into a tree in the middle of the photographers. We waited as this tree was neither a nest hole or feeding tree so they would have to come out and so we waited. We were only there for around 10 minutes before one of the adorable little squirrels appeared in a fork in the tree, only around 2m above the ground and 3m away from us. It was amazing to see this tiny and rarely seen species so close and in the daylight. We watched as it clung to the tree trunk before disappearing back into the fork of the tree, it repeated this behaviour for a while until it burst up towards the top of the tree, the speed of the squirrel scampering up the trunk was spell bounding and then once it reached its destination (a large branch heading out towards its original nesting tree) it threw itself into the air and with its expanded skin flaps between the arms and legs glided with precision and ease to land in the tree and climb straight up and away into the hole. We then waited for the second squirrel to do the same thing, most flying squirrels are very habitual and use the same pathways and so we were a little prepared for what may happen. Within a few minutes we were rewarded with the second Siberian flying squirrel as it followed suit. This one though stayed outside and perched on a small knot in the tree and allowed for good pictures before it too disappeared into the tree hole. The first one by now had come back out and was now moving from tree to tree in the forest foraging. The sunlight was beginning to fade now and we decided to leave and head back to the hotel as the chances of getting better sightings than we had just had were fading as fast as the sun against the horizon. We then said our good byes to Mr. Matsuda and had our meal at the hotel.



## Day 11 **Abashiri**

## ***Ice Breaker Cruise & Travelling***

Today involved a great deal of travelling on several different modes of transport, firstly we went to the harbour after breakfast for our cruise on the ice-breaker vessel the *Aurora II*, we could clearly see that most of the sea ice had been blown well away and the chances of seeing largha seal colonies would be slim, however there would be sea birds around here and we positioned ourselves at the bow so we had a good overall view of the water. Even before we left the harbour we spotted Steller's sea eagles, white-tailed eagles and black-eared kites as well as slaty-backed gulls, veega gulls and glaucous gulls. There was also a small flock of greater scaup and a larger number of harlequin ducks in harbour, as the boat began to depart we spooked some of these ducks and on closer inspection what Martin had first thought were mallards at a distance (once they flew past us), turned out to be falcated ducks. A small flock of all males, this stunning duck is a very rare visitor to Hokkaido during the winter and what a great sighting. Also in the distance flying very quickly low to the water (in typical auk fashion) Martin spotted a rhinoceros puffin flying away from the cliffs west of the harbour towards the open ocean and in the same direction we were



heading. As we left the harbour we travelled past a few pelagic cormorants and this would be the only species (other than a couple of vega gulls that flew along with us) that we saw as the skipper sought out any bits of sea ice. It felt strange that the boat would deliberately head towards the biggest pieces of ice around, the boat then rising on top of the ice and uses the weight of the ship to crush the ice into many pieces before carrying on. The only new species that we saw today was a pair of white-winged scoters flying from the harbour and out to the open water and then we moored into the harbour and disembarked; we were now on a tight schedule as he began to head to the central Japanese Alps back on Honshu. So we rushed to the airport in order to catch our flight back to Tokyo, saying our goodbyes to Mr. Kuhuwara here, we were also a little unsure of the impact that a storm would have, for the past few days we had been keeping an eye on a storm that was due to arrive from southern Japan today, at one point we were unsure if we would have to rearrange our flight for yesterday but it looked like the storm would not hit until the evening. However the storm was currently over Tokyo and so we were delayed as the plane had not got from Tokyo to Memanbetsu early this morning. However the delay was not too long and we did make some time up on the journey. The problem is that our planned scheduled only allowed for around 20 minutes for delays and so we were really up against it now. Once we arrived at Tokyo airport we caught the train to Shinagawa station and changed our train to catch the bullet train to Nagano, this was the last bullet train of the day and meant that we would miss our connecting train from Nagano to our final train station near the ryokan we would be staying in. Instead once we got to Nagano we got a taxi instead and arrived at our ryokan in the evening. We checked in and had our dinner, this is one of the best ryokans in the whole of Japan and the Imperial family themselves stay here when in the area, the meals were incredible and extravagant and a great way to end a long day of travelling. Tomorrow we would spend the day with the most northerly living primates (excluding humans of course) at their hot spring home in the nearby mountains.

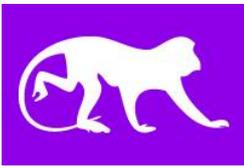
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## Day 12 Jigokudani Snow Monkey Park

## *Wildlife Watching*

This morning we breakfasted (in the preference of a small flock of Japanese grosbeaks (a very close relative to the hawfinch) that were flying around the small garden) and then walked the short walk to the entrance of Jigokudani Snow Monkey Park, this park has become world famous for its population of around 160 Japanese macaques (an endemic species to Japan) that live here and have learnt to stay warm and relax in the natural hot springs that are found here. When the local people first saw the macaques using the hot water they built a couple of permanent hot springs and the macaques now use these for grooming, sleeping, playing and establishing and enforcing their strict social hierarchies. Once you reach the entrance to the park there is a 1.6km walk through the coniferous forest (another example of the primary forest being replaced by a monoculture plantation) along the hills of the Japanese Alps, this walk is very peaceful and during the summer it is possible to see the Japanese macaques foraging and feeding on the blossoms, seeds and nuts of the trees here. However during the winter their diet is supplemented by handfuls of grain given out near the hot springs, this helps keep the population of macaques stable as well as keeping them around the hot springs for the tourists. Even without the supplementary diet the macaques are likely to spend time around the hot springs as this is a great source of warmth, most of the high ranking (and powerful) macaques are here (good for protection and breeding rites for lower ranking males and females) and also many of the trees around here have lots of fresh growth available for forage. So as we walked through the forest towards the hot springs we didn't see any macaques and reached the hot springs in good time. There had been around 6 inches of snow fall the night before and there was a nice covering everywhere. It also meant we could try and track down an elusive Japanese serow that are sometimes seen as the feed along the hills here, we did find fresh tracks from this morning but no actual sighting.

Once we arrived at the hot spring area the troop of macaques was very dispersed with many scattered all over the hillside, in the trees, valley and also in the hot spring pool. Many were foraging for acorns and other seeds in the snow, using their very dexterous hands to feel for the seeds in the deep snow. How they do not suffer from frostbite as they thrust their hands into the snow for hours on end is incredible. We walked around the macaques as they all continued to exhibit their individual behaviours and photographed them at our leisure. It was amazing to spend so much time in close proximity to these curious and intelligent animals as they played, fought, ate, groomed and relaxed all around us. We spent most of our time around the main hot spring, this is where all of the high ranking macaques gather to spend most of the day. Macaque females inherit their ranking from their mother and it can lead to some infant macaques out ranking adult females. It is quite strange to see adult macaques bullied and forced out of prime spot by infant macaque. All around the hot spring were many of the lower ranking macaques huddled together for warmth, every time one of the dominant macaques would leave the hot spring one of these (the braver ones) would run in and try and spend as long in the pool before they were chased off by the returning dominant macaque. However once the grain was handed out around the river valley the whole pool cleared out (for around 5 minutes), all that is except for one young macaque. This 2 year old male was in the pool from when we arrived to when we left in the late afternoon, he was also one of more entertaining macaques and allowed for fantastic photographs and close up observations. Probably the most important behaviour amongst the very social Japanese macaques is grooming, most of this occurs in the warmth of the pool and it seems like these macaques have found themselves their very own luxury spa! Grooming is the best way for lower ranking macaques move up the social ladder by making friends with higher ranking macaques. At first this will be one way grooming (low ranking grooming the high ranking macaque) but eventually (with enough time and grooming) the higher ranking macaque



may reciprocate. When this is cross species this can result in mating (although the dominant male of the troop will put a stop to any mating if he see it), however this is next to impossible to actually follow through with and many of the young macaques are from other males. However his belief that they are all his means that he protects them all the same and as all of the males are mating with all of the females (behind the dominant males back) they all help to protect the whole troop. To avoid inbreeding in this very promiscuous social system most of the males who are born in the group will leave once they reach sexual maturity, the females tend to stay in their natal troop and it is the males that keep the genetic diversity of the population going when they are accepted to other troops. Once they enter a new troop they will slowly and surely work their way up the social ladder and with some luck they will become one of the highest ranking males or maybe the dominant male of the whole troop. Around midday we lunched at the small and basic guest house located next to the hot springs and along the river that runs through the valley. The valley whose name translates to Hells Canyon due to its steaming water. After a local noddle soup made with many ingredients found in the mountains here we returned to the hot springs and it began to snow a little, this snow fall was the exactly what we needed in order to get the iconic photographs of the macaques in the pool, steam rising from the water and snow falling and covering their grey hairs highlighting their red faces. It was this afternoon that we found the dominant male of the whole troop, he was a very large male and his face showed the scars of years of living life at the top of a very tough and political system. He was rested in the pool and looked a picture of bliss and relaxation as he was first groomed by two other adult macaques (usually only the highest ranking males and females will be allowed to groom the dominant male, and he will only reciprocate if he needs a favour from them (for fighting rivals in the case of grooming males and mating for grooming females)). We watched as he was joined by some of the other older macaques and they all relaxed as the afternoon light began to fade as the sun lowered behind the hills. Away from the pool many of the macaques were socialising around the warm water river, running over cables that lead across the river and also making the most of the rocks that make for great jumping over the river. Other macaques stayed huddled together on the rocks, their pink furless faces peering out from a blanket of rich brown fur; other youngsters played around in trees, bouncing up and down and rocking branches before ripping off pieces of bark and dead leaves and eating them. It is questionable what nutritional value there is this food but in the winter there is not a lot of other natural food in the forest (especially since the forest has been cleared and replanted with the wrong trees for many of the species here). We stayed here until the sunset was upon us and then we walked back to the hotel, after such a great day with the monkeys we had one last surprise, on the pathway through the forest a small winter wren flew across the path and down into a small log shelter hidden away underneath the path. Once back at the ryokan we had another huge Japanese banquet meal and retired to our rooms.



## **Day 13 Tokyo**

## ***Travelling***

This morning we breakfasted in the ryokan and with such an incredible day with the macaques yesterday we all decided that we would not better our photographs or sightings and that we should make the journey back to Tokyo earlier (rather than the afternoon) and so we could relax a little in Tokyo as Derek & Sally's flight was a morning departure tomorrow. So we hoped on the shuttle bus from the ryokan and then took the local train to Nagano, the train to Nagano took us away from the Japanese Alps and towards the metropolis that is the world's largest city. Along the way we past various orchards (this region of Japan being famous for its apples) as well as some vineyards before arriving in Nagano and boarding our bullet train to Tokyo. Once in Tokyo we changed trains and took the airport express (although it didn't seem like much of an express) and arrived at the hotel in the afternoon, after checking and freshening up we dined in the restaurant for our final meal in Japan.

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## **Day 16 Home**

## ***Departure***

This morning we all left the hotel in the morning on the airport shuttle bus and saw Derek & Sally off at security before both Martin (Vladivostok) and Steve (Honolulu) caught their respective flights.

# Species List

Japanese Winter Wildlife Tour / February & March 2014

## Mammals (\* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Japanese serow	<i>Capricornis crispus</i>
2	Sika deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>
3	Mountain hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>
4	Japanese macaque	<i>Macaca fuscata</i>
5	Unknown Mice like Rodent	<i>Muridea spp.</i>
6	Sable	<i>Mustela zibellina</i>
7	American mink	<i>Neovison vison</i>
8	Largha seal	<i>Phoca largha</i>
9	Siberian flying squirrel	<i>Pteromys volans</i>
10	Eurasian red squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>
11	Brown bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>
12	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>

February						March							
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		*	4	6	5	1	*	2	1		*		

## Birds (\* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
2	Long-tailed tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
3	Northern pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
4	Eurasian teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
5	Falcated duck	<i>Anas falcata</i>
6	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
7	Eastern spot-billed duck	<i>Anas zonorhyncha</i>
8	Common pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
9	Greater scaup	<i>Aythya marila</i>
10	Blakiston's fish owl	<i>Bubo blakistoni</i>
11	Common goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula</i>

February						March							
23	24	25	26	27	28	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
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