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Japan in winter

2nd - 15th January 2009

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Copper Pheasant, Karuizawa, Honshu

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Japan in winter is truly a spectacular destination with almost too many highlights to mention. The crane spectacle of Arasaki is one of the world's great avian spectacles and there is much more besides; stunning Copper Pheasants in the mountains of Honshu, immense Steller's Sea Eagles in snowy Hokkaido, Red-crowned Cranes dancing in the snow, Japanese Murrelets, and amazing nighttime encounters with fishing Blakiston's Fish Owls. Other stand out birds during our trip were Long-tailed and Pallas's Rosefinch, Japanese Accentor, an awesome Ural Owl, Falcated Duck, Baikal Teal, Ancient Murrelet, Long-billed Murrelet, Siberian White Crane, Japanese Green Woodpecker, Japanese Bush Warbler, Chinese Penduline Tit, Grey-bellied Bullfinch, Japanese Grosbeak and Grey Bunting. Our pelagic trip to Hachijo-jimo also proved an outstanding success with Providence Petrel, Tristram's Storm Petrel, Black-footed, Laysan and an awesome Short-tailed Albatross seen.

Our winter Japan adventure began in the metropolis of Tokyo but we were swiftly on our way, in typically efficient Japanese style, speeding along the expressways to our first destination, the town of Karuizawa nestled in the forested mountains north of the capital city. We spent two full days around the picturesque snowy forests of Karuizawa enjoying the fantastic birdlife. Subtle Japanese Accentors and Long-tailed Rosefinch appeared as early as our first morning and regular species during our forays were Japanese

Pygmy Woodpecker, Long-tailed, Willow, Coal, Japanese and Varied Tits, Oriental Greenfinch, Eurasian Jay, Brown-eared Bulbul and Dusky Thrush. Then there were scarcer species; Japanese Green Woodpecker showed daily, Eurasian Siskin, Hawfinch, Japanese Grosbeak and Siberian Bluetail, a few Rustic Buntings amongst the commoner Meadow Buntings and a surprise group of Pallas's Rosefinch – a scarce winter visitor here.

Rivers and streams in the areas gave frequent sightings of Crested Kingfisher, Brown Dipper and Japanese Wagtail.

One of the stars here is Copper Pheasant and we had great performances. We struck gold as early as the first afternoon when a stunning male Copper Pheasant fed in the open forest and proving surprisingly easy to locate as it shuffled around in the crunchy leaf litter, the next morning views of a pair were even better and then on our final morning came one of the highlight experiences of the tour when we encountered no less than three Copper Pheasants, a single female and two rather frisky males which chased each other around the slopes with such fury that they almost struck our car before perching up in a nearby tree for great views.



Meadow Bunting, and Alpine Accentor, Karuizawa, Honshu © Rob Hutchinson

At dusk on the first day we could hear the calls of an Ural Owl but it was very distant and after enjoying our first Japanese Giant Flying Squirrel in the spotlight we retired for dinner before again returning to the forest. Employing a different technique, we drove slowly around the quiet road while spotlighting from the vehicle, and this worked perfectly when a huge pallid Ural Owl soon filled the spotlight.

We also found time to head north to Jigokudani where a bracing walk through the snowy pine forest bought us to amazing heated pools in a picturesque valley where we had quite wonderful encounters with the Japanese Macaques or 'Snow Monkeys' as they bathed, cleaned one another and slept in these luxurious steaming baths. The areas also produced several confiding Alpine Accentors, our first Bull-headed Shrike and on the return exploration of some river ways gave a host of good birds including a good view of a female Green Pheasant.

Then it was time to head back to bustling Tokyo and a short flight saw us at on the island of Kyushu where we made our way to the west of the island, arriving in the evening at Arasaki Crane Reserve where the buggling calls of cranes echoing through the darkness were a prelude to what is one of the worlds great avian spectacles.

The next morning we watched in wonder as thousands of cranes took to the skies before settling in the nearby fields to feed, Hooded Crane predominated numbering nearly 10,000 but there were also very many White-naped Cranes and careful searching also found two Siberian White Cranes and a handful of Sandhill and Common Cranes.

The wildfowl flocks comprised mainly Chinese Spot-billed Ducks, Mallard, Eurasian Wigeon, Eurasian Teal and Pintail with smaller numbers of Gadwall, Northern Shoveler and Shelduck but the highlights were at least four Falcated Ducks and more than 40 Baikal Teal. Many Oriental Rooks were among the flocks of Oriental and Large-billed Crows. A nearby reedy river had many Reed Buntings, Brambling, flocks of Japanese White-eyes and great views of Chinese Penduline Tits while the scrub held Japanese Bush Wabler, Chestnut-eared Bunting, Black-faced Bunting, Meadow Bunting, Daurian Redstart, Bull-headed

Shrike, Chinese Blackbird and Pale Thrush surrounding fields were thronging with Japanese Skylark, Black-backed Wagtail and Buff-bellied Pipit. Long-billed Plover – a difficult species elsewhere – gave great views on the gravelly banks of a nearby river.

A stop at Yatsushiro to the north was unfortunately at high tide but we still found several Saunderson's Gulls along with Heuglin's, East Siberian and Slaty-backed Gulls.. Offshore were several Black-necked and Great-crested Grebes, Red-breasted and Common Merganser, and the resident *osculans* race of Eurasian Oystercatcher.

As we headed east we found a nice flock of 55 Mandarin on a newly constructed dam before settling in Hyuga for an overnight stay.



Red-crowned Crane, Hokkaido

© Rob Hutchinson / Birdtour Asia



Harlequin Duck, and Brunnich's Guillemot, Hokkaido



©Rob Hutchinson

The next morning we explored the nearby Hyuga harbour and got lovely views of several Japanese Murrelets on the calm waters. Nearby we finally got close enough views of the local Great Cormorants flocks to satisfactorily see all the salient feature of accompanying Japanese Cormorant and among the gulls here we found a single Slaty-backed Gull and good numbers of Black-tailed Gulls. Later in the day

the numerous wildfowl on estuaries to the south again held both Falcated Duck and Baikal Teal while in a nearby park a chance stop found our first Brown-headed Thrush among larger numbers of Pale Thrushes. Our birding the next day was at Mi-ike in the mountains of Kyushu, in fantastic forests surrounding a stunning volcanic lake. Our targets appeared after some work; firstly rather non-descript but charismatic Grey Buntings then a long wait gave nice views of Ryukyu Minivets. Other highlights included many Asian Stubtail in the forest, Olive-backed Pipits tail-pumping around the campsite, Siberian Bluetail, Daurian Redstart, Japanese Grosbeak, White-backed Woodpecker and amazingly obliging Japanese Green Woodpeckers as Mountain Hawk Eagles circled overhead and careful scrutiny of the large rafts of duck revealed large numbers of Baikal Teal and even more of a bonus was the male Baer's Pochard that had been present for some days previous.

In the afternoon we return again to Tokyo, transferring to the port to embark on our exciting 'pelagic' aboard the Hachijo-jima ferry. We are up on deck before dawn the next morning and our first Laysan Albatross appeared almost immediately – the first of more than 400 during the day. Little else appears except for a couple of storm petrels – one close bird identified as Tristram's Storm Petrel, a few Black-footed Albatrosses and several Providence Petrels giving excellent views. We persist in the choppy seas however and on the return journey score great views of an awesome sub-adult Short-tailed Albatross passing by the boat. Tristram's Storm Petrels also increase in number leading to a final tally of over 30 before we arrive back into Tokyo in the evening.

Snow on Hokkaido in the north of Japan the next morning causes the cancellation of our planned flight but some rapid rearranging sent us to a nearby town and we arrive at our minshuku on the shore of Lake Furen as planned having enjoyed our first Steller's Sea Eagles en route.



Steller's Sea Eagle, Hokkaido

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Our next two days exploring the area were both varied and productive. The many harbours and lakes in the area provide excellent views of ducks with stunning Long-tailed Duck, Greater Scaup, Black Scoter, Common Goldeneye, Smew and Harlequin Duck within touching distance. Several Brunnich's Guillemots happily swam around the harbours and a male Bufflehead was a major highlight and a big bonus for our Asia lists!

Gulls were numerous and we spent some time studying the different ages and variable plumages of several species; Glaucous-winged, Glaucous, East Siberian, Slaty-backed and Kamchatka Gulls were amazingly abundant.

A morning visit to Cape Nosappu followed some strong winds and blizzards and may have helped bring many birds close inshore. Ancient Murrelets showed close inshore off the rocks, a single Long-billed Murrelet gave prolonged views and there were many Brunnich's Guillemots, Common Guillemots and Spectacled Guillemots on offer. Divers were abundant with Pacific and Red-throated commonest but

several Black-throated were found and a hulking White-billed Diver flew north. Stejneger's Scoter gave rather distant views as we scanned through the commoner Black Scoter, Red-necked Grebe and Slavonian Grebes.

A return visit in the evening found Red-faced Cormorants in the Pelagic Cormorant roost here and on the other afternoon we visited a reserve near Kushiro where we marvelled at hundreds of Red-crowned Cranes as they fed and danced in the fresh snowy fields – this must surely be one of the world's most beautiful cranes.

We also ventured into the forests during the day and conveniently placed and well stocked bird feeders gave lovely views of the frosty *asiatica* race of Eurasian Nuthatch, Hawfinch, Grey-bellied Bullfinch, Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker, Marsh Tits, Varied Tits, Eurasian Treecreeper and a party of stunning white-headed *caudatus* Long-tailed Tits.



Eurasian Nuthatch ssp. *asiatica*, and Pine Grosbeak, Hokkaido

© Rob Hutchinson

It was then time to head even further north and birds continued to appear; a Rough-legged Buzzard looked stunning as he hovered in the early morning sun then a tip off about the location of some fruiting rowan trees paid off with large flocks of Bohemian Waxwings, Naumman's Thrush among the Dusky Thrushes and at least four Pine Grosbeaks.

In the afternoon we visited the Notsuke peninsula, where we had great close looks at Stejneger's Scoters just offshore, quite amazing views of Steller's Sea Eagles attracted to the waste fish from the fishing boats, these spectacular birds with white wing patches and immense orange legs and bill positively dwarfing the accompanying White-tailed Eagles. Asian Rosy Finches finally gave satisfactory views as furtive flocks fed along the beaches.

That night was one of the most anticipated of the trip and in the late afternoon we found our way to a remote little valley in the snowy hills of Shiretoko Peninsula and waited in eager anticipation. Even before dusk the deep calls of our target could be heard echoing around the valley and after a quick dinner we settled down, using our car as a hide in eager anticipation. We barely noticed the cold as we waited excitedly and after some time a huge shape glided down to the floodlit river nearby and we were enjoying fantastic views of a huge Blakiston's Fish Owl perched in a nearby tree. It soon dropped down to the river where it wasted no time in partaking of the fish provided by our minshuku hosts. Amazingly at this point it was joined by a second bird which gladly accepted its fishy gift, leaving us euphoric. We waited longer enjoying more views of up to three individuals before retiring to the warmth of our beds.

Our final day provided a fitting climax to the tour as we again spent time photographing Steller's Sea Eagles at Notsuke and enjoying again the Harlequin Ducks, Long-tailed Ducks and Brunnich's Guillemots of the nearby harbours.

For a series of photographs taken from the tour please scroll below the systematic list. Please contact us at info@birdtourasia.com regarding custom tour to Japan.



Blakiston's Fish Owl and Steller's Sea Eagle, Hokkaido © Rob Hutchinson and James Eaton

Systematic List

GAVIIFORMES: Gaviidae

Red-throated Diver
Black-throated Diver
Pacific Diver
White-billed Diver

Gavia stellata
Gavia arctica
Gavia pacifica
Gavia adamsii

PODICIPEDIFORMES: Podicipedidae

Little Grebe
Red-necked Grebe
Great Crested Grebe
Slavonian Grebe
Black-necked Grebe

Tachybaptus ruficollis
Podiceps grisegena
Podiceps cristatus
Podiceps auritus
Podiceps nigricollis

PROCELLARIIFORMES: Diomedidae

Short-tailed Albatross
Laysan Albatross
Black-footed Albatross

Phoebastria albatrus
Phoebastria immutabilis
Phoebastria nigripes

PROCELLARIIFORMES: Procellariidae

Providence Petrel
Sooty Shearwater

Pterodroma solandri
Puffinus griseus

PROCELLARIIFORMES: Hydrobatidae

Tristram's Storm-Petrel

Oceanodroma tristrami

PELECANIFORMES: Phalacrocoracidae

Great Cormorant
Japanese Cormorant
Pelagic Cormorant
Red-faced Cormorant

Phalacrocorax carbo
Phalacrocorax capillatus
Phalacrocorax pelagicus
Phalacrocorax urile

CICONIIFORMES: Ardeidae

Grey Heron
Great Egret
Little Egret
Pacific Reef-Heron
Black-crowned Night-Heron

Ardea cinerea
Ardea alba
Egretta garzetta
Egretta sacra
Nycticorax nycticorax

ANSERIFORMES: Anatidae

Whooper Swan
Common Shelduck
Mandarin Duck
Eurasian Wigeon
American Wigeon
Falcated Duck
Gadwall
Baikal Teal
Eurasian Teal
Mallard
Spot-billed Duck
Northern Pintail
Baer's Pochard
Northern Shoveler
Common Pochard
Tufted Duck
Greater Scaup
Harlequin Duck
Long-tailed Duck
Black Scoter
White-winged Scoter
Common Goldeneye
Smew
Red-breasted Merganser
Common Merganser

Cygnus cygnus
Tadorna tadorna
Aix galericulata
Anas penelope
Anas americana
Anas falcata
Anas strepera
Anas formosa
Anas crecca
Anas platyrhynchos
Anas poecilorhyncha
Anas acuta
Aythya baeri
Anas clypeata
Aythya ferina
Aythya fuligula
Aythya marila
Histrionicus histrionicus
Clangula hyemalis
Melanitta nigra
Melanitta fusca
Bucephala clangula
Mergellus albellus
Mergus serrator
Mergus merganser

FALCONIFORMES: Pandionidae

Osprey

Pandion haliaetus

FALCONIFORMES: Accipitridae

Black-eared Kite
White-tailed Eagle
Steller's Sea-Eagle
Eurasian Sparrowhawk
Japanese Buzzard
Rough-legged Buzzard
Mountain Hawk-Eagle

Milvus [migrans]
Haliaeetus albicilla
Haliaeetus pelagicus
Accipiter nisus
Buteo japonicus
Buteo lagopus
Spizaetus nipalensis orinetalis

FALCONIFORMES: Falconidae

Eurasian Kestrel
Merlin
Peregrine Falcon

Falco tinnunculus
Falco columbarius
Falco peregrinus

GALLIFORMES: Phasianidae

Copper Pheasant
Green Pheasant

Syrnaticus soemmerringii
Phasianus versicolor

GRUIFORMES: Gruidae

Sandhill Crane
White-naped Crane

Grus canadensis
Grus vipio

Common Crane
Hooded Crane
Red-crowned Crane
Siberian White Crane

Grus grus
Grus monacha
Grus japonensis
Grus leucogeranus

GRUIFORMES: Rallidae

Common Moorhen
Eurasian Coot

Gallinula chloropus
Fulica atra

CHARADRIIFORMES: Haematopodidae

Eurasian Oystercatcher

Haematopus ostralegus osculans

CHARADRIIFORMES: Charadriidae

Northern Lapwing
Grey-headed Lapwing
Grey Plover
Long-billed Plover
Little Ringed Plover
Kentish Plover

Vanellus vanellus
Vanellus cinereus
Pluvialis squatarola
Charadrius placidus
Charadrius dubius
Charadrius alexandrinus

CHARADRIIFORMES: Scolopacidae

Common Snipe
Eurasian Curlew
Common Sandpiper
Green Sandpiper
Common Greenshank
Ruddy Turnstone
Dunlin
Ruff

Gallinago gallinago
Numenius arquata
Actitis hypoleucos
Tringa ochropus
Tringa nebularia
Arenaria interpres
Calidris alpina
Philomachus pugnax

CHARADRIIFORMES: Laridae

Black-tailed Gull
Kamchatka Gull
Glaucous-winged Gull
Glaucous Gull
Heuglin's Gull
East Siberian Gull
Slaty-backed Gull
Black-headed Gull
Saunders' Gull
Black-legged Kittiwake

Larus crassirostris
Larus kamchatka
Larus glaucescens
Larus hyperboreus
Larus heuglini
Larus vegae
Larus schistisagus
Larus ridibundus
Larus saundersi
Rissa tridactyla

CHARADRIIFORMES: Alcidae

Common Guillemot
Brunnich's Guillemot
Spectacled Guillemot
Long-billed Murrelet
Ancient Murrelet
Japanese Murrelet

Uria aalge
Uria lomvia
Cepphus carbo
Brachyramphus perdix
Synthliboramphus antiquus
Synthliboramphus wumizusume

COLUMBIFORMES: Columbidae

Rock Pigeon
Oriental Turtle Dove
White-bellied Green Pigeon

Columba livia
Streptopelia orientalis
Treron sieboldii

STRIGIFORMES: Strigidae

Blakiston's Fish Owl

Ketupa blakistoni

Ural Owl

Strix uralensis

CORACIIFORMES: Alcedinidae

Common Kingfisher

Alcedo atthis

Crested Kingfisher

Megaceryle lugubris

PICIFORMES: Picidae

Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker

Dendrocopos kizuki

White-backed Woodpecker

Dendrocopos leucotos

Great Spotted Woodpecker

Dendrocopos major

Japanese Green Woodpecker

Picus awokera

PASSERIFORMES: Alaudidae

Japanese Skylark

Alauda arvensis japonica

PASSERIFORMES: Hirundinidae

Barn Swallow

Hirundo rustica

House Martin

Delichon urbicum

PASSERIFORMES: Motacillidae

Olive-backed Pipit

Anthus hodgsoni

Buff-bellied Pipit

Anthus rubescens japonicus

Black-backed Wagtail

Motacilla alba lugens

Japanese Wagtail

Motacilla grandis

Grey Wagtail

Motacilla cinerea

PASSERIFORMES: Campephagidae

Ryukyu Minivet

Pericrocotus tegimae

PASSERIFORMES: Pycnonotidae

Brown-eared Bulbul

Ixos amaurotis

PASSERIFORMES: Regulidae

Goldcrest

Regulus regulus

PASSERIFORMES: Bombycillidae

Bohemian Waxwing

Bombycilla garrulus

PASSERIFORMES: Cinclidae

Brown Dipper

Cinclus pallasii

PASSERIFORMES: Troglodytidae

Winter Wren

Troglodytes troglodytes

PASSERIFORMES: Prunellidae

Japanese Accentor

Prunella rubida

PASSERIFORMES: Turdidae

Blue Rock Thrush

Monticola solitarius

Chinese Blackbird

Turdus mandarinus

Pale Thrush

Turdus pallidus

Brown-headed Thrush

Turdus chrysolaus

Dusky Thrush

Turdus naumanni

PASSERIFORMES: Sylviidae

Asian Stubtail

Urosphena squameiceps

Japanese Bush Warbler

Cettia diphone

PASSERIFORMES: Muscicapidae

Siberian Bluetail
Daurian Redstart

Tarsiger cyanurus
Phoenicurus auroreus

PASSERIFORMES: Aegithalidae

Long-tailed Tit

Aegithalos caudatus caudatus
Aegithalos caudatus kiusiuensis
Aegithalos caudatus trivirgatus

PASSERIFORMES: Paridae

Marsh Tit
Willow Tit
Coal Tit
Japanese Tit
Varied Tit

Poecile palustris restrictus
Poecile montana
Periparus ater
Parus minor
Sittiparus varius

PASSERIFORMES: Sittidae

Eurasian Nuthatch

Sitta europaea asiatica

PASSERIFORMES: Certhiidae

Eurasian Treecreeper

Certhia familiaris

PASSERIFORMES: Remizidae

Chinese Penduline Tit

Remiz consobrinus

PASSERIFORMES: Zosteropidae

Japanese White-eye

Zosterops japonicus

PASSERIFORMES: Laniidae

Bull-headed Shrike

Lanius bucephalus

PASSERIFORMES: Corvidae

Eurasian Jay
Azure-winged Magpie
Oriental Rook
Oriental Crow
Large-billed Crow

Garrulus glandarius
Cyanopica cyanus
Corvus frugilegus pasinator
Corvus [corone] orientalis
Corvus macrorhynchos

PASSERIFORMES: Sturnidae

White-cheeked Starling

Sturnus cineraceus

PASSERIFORMES: Passeridae

Eurasian Tree Sparrow

Passer montanus

PASSERIFORMES: Fringillidae

Brambling
Asian Rosy Finch
Pine Grosbeak
Pallas' Rosefinch
Red Crossbill
Common Redpoll
Eurasian Siskin
Oriental Greenfinch
Grey-bellied Bullfinch
Hawfinch
Yellow-billed Grosbeak

Fringilla montifringilla
Leucosticte arctoa
Pinicola enucleator
Carpodacus roseus
Loxia curvirostra
Carduelis flammaea
Carduelis spinus
Carduelis sinica
Pyrrhula [pyrrhula] griseiventris
Coccothraustes coccothraustes
Eophona migratoria

Japanese Grosbeak
Long-tailed Rosefinch

Eophona personata
Uragus sibiricus

PASSERIFORMES: Emberizidae

Meadow Bunting
Chestnut-eared Bunting
Rustic Bunting
Black-faced Bunting
Grey Bunting
Reed Bunting
Lapland Bunting

Emberiza cioides
Emberiza fucata
Emberiza rustica
Emberiza spodocephala
Emberiza variabilis
Emberiza schoeniclus pyrrhulina
Calcarius lapponicus

MAMMALS

Japanese Macaque
Red Fox
Harbor Seal
Kurile Seal
Sika Deer
Japanese Giant Flying Squirrel
Japanese Squirrel
Japanese Dormouse

Macaca fuscata
Vulpes vulpes
Phoca vitulina
Phoca kurilensis
Cervus nippon
Petaurista leucogenys
Sciurus lis
Glirulus japonicus

Photos from the tour



Red-crowned Crane, Hokkaido

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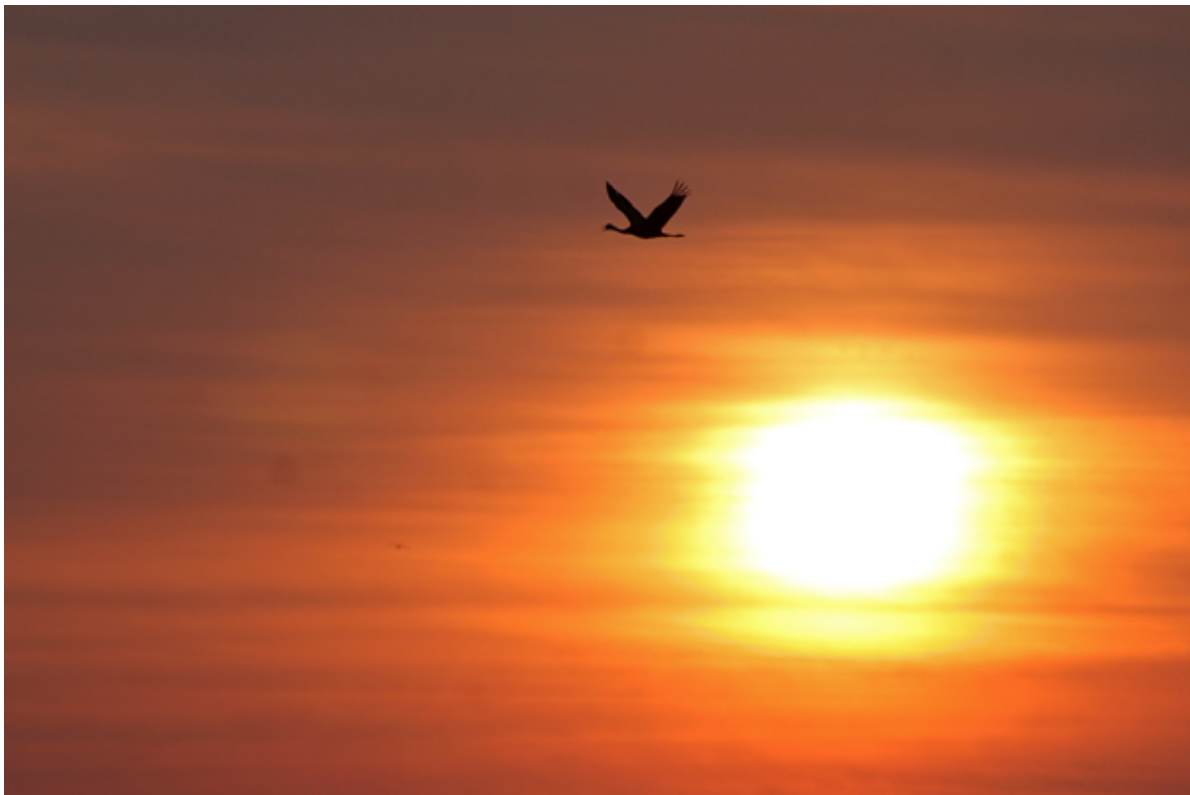
Blakiston's Fish Owl, Hokkaido

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White-naped Crane, Kyushu

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Hooded Crane, Kyushu

© James Eaton / Birdtour Asia



Hooded and White-naped Cranes, Kyushu

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