

Winter birds in the Land of the Rising Sun

Japan is a huge archipelago stretching along the northern Pacific Ocean. Our tour concentrates on four contrasting regions: Kyushu, Hokkaido, Katano on the Sea of Japan and Karuizawa in the Japanese Alps. This winter tour to Japan should produce many memorable highlights in a country steeped in its own tradition and culture. Interesting species present in winter include Pacific Diver, White-naped and Hooded Cranes, Baikal Teal, Blakiston's Eagle Owl and impressive concentrations of Steller's and White-tailed Eagles.

This is probably the most comprehensive Japanese winter tour available today taking in a wide-range of habitats and sites. Birdwatching Breaks has been running tours to Japan since 1996, totalling 17 tours to date. Mark Finn has an extensive knowledge and experience of Japan's unique birdlife and where to find it. Over the years, Birdwatching Breaks has built up trust with local Japanese birdwatchers, making the company one of the market leaders to this wonderful country.

The following itinerary is sometimes subject to change due to ferry schedules from Nagoya.

Days 1-2: We fly to Tokyo, arriving on the morning of Day 2. On arrival, we travel to Tokyo station and take the bullet train to Karuizawa for a two-night stay. Karuizawa is a picturesque town situated in the foothills of the Japanese Alps. We make an initial exploration of woodland and forest habitats for Brown Dipper, Japanese Wagtail, Oriental Turtle Dove, Oriental Greenfinch, Hawfinch, Brambling and Rustic Buntings.

Day 3: This morning we walk the forest trails of Karuizawa searching for the rare Copper Pheasant. Feeders attract Japanese Green Woodpecker, Long-tailed and Pallas's Rosefinches, Japanese and Varied Tits, Japanese Grosbeak and Meadow Bunting. Near the river, we may locate Japanese Accentor and, in trees laden with mistletoe, Japanese Waxwings. During the afternoon, we explore rural roads around Karuizawa in search of Japanese Green Pheasant. Patches of mature woodland often have White-backed Woodpecker and wintering Daurian Redstarts.

Day 4: Today we travel back to Haneda airport for an internal flight to Miyazaki in Kyushu. On arrival, we transfer to Hyuga. Night at Hyuga.

Dates

Tour A: February 5th-20th 2016

Tour B: February 3rd-18th 2017

Leader: Mark Finn

Group Size: 8

Birds: 155-175

Day 5: Our main interest today is the near-endemic Japanese Murrelet which is best viewed by taking a short boat trip offshore. After seeing the murrelet, we travel to Mi-ike, a forested area of evergreens and deciduous trees surrounding a volcanic lake. Mi-ike has wildfowl including Baikal Teal. Walking along the paths provides views of Daurian Redstart, Red-flanked Bluetail and Grey and Yellow-throated Buntings. A campground is productive for Japanese Green, Pygmy and White-backed Woodpeckers, Olive-backed Pipit, Varied Tit and Japanese Grosbeak. En route to Izumi we may locate Mandarin Duck, Chinese Bamboo Partridge and Russet Sparrow. On arrival, we have a two-night stay in Izumi.

Day 6: This morning we visit Arasaki crane reserve, with wintering Hooded and White-naped Cranes and, possibly, Sandhill,



Red-crowned Cranes Photo: Jo Latham

Common, Demoiselle and Siberian Cranes. Extensive estuarine habitats at Arasaki attract Japanese Cormorant, Intermediate Egret, Black-eared Kite and wildfowl. Agricultural fields are a winter home to Greater Painted Snipe, Japanese Skylark, Oriental Rook, Daurian Jackdaw and Rustic, Black-faced and Meadow Buntings. Gardens and hedgerows of Arasaki attract Pale Thrush, Hawfinch, Oriental Greenfinch and Japanese Grosbeak. In the afternoon, we visit a boulder-strewn river holding Long-billed Plover, Crested Kingfisher, Blue Rock Thrush and Japanese Wagtail.

Day 7: An early start today as we travel to Ariake-kai, a coastal bay north of Arasaki which has extensive areas of mudflats, river estuaries and agricultural fields. At high tide we study roosting and feeding Saunders' Gulls, Black-faced Spoonbills and shorebirds. Deep-water channels hold Falcated Ducks. Muddy dykes usually have Spotted Redshank and Marsh Sandpipers and Chinese Penduline Tits in the reeds. A remnant patch of marsh near Saga is reliable

for Japanese Green Pheasant, Eurasian Woodcock and Ruddy Crake. Transfer to Saga for the night.

Day 8: Today we revisit Ariake-se before heading north to Shikanoshima Island which is reached via a causeway. Shikanoshima is a regular haunt of Red-throated, Black-throated and Pacific Divers whilst sheltered bays offer a safe refuge to Black-necked Grebe, Smew, Greater Scaup and other wildfowl. Shikanoshima is a reliable area for wintering Japanese Bush Warbler, Pale Thrush and, on offshore stacks, Japanese Cormorants. Transfer to Fukuoka for our flight to Komatsu on the Sea of Japan for a two-night stay.

Days 9-10: Our main interest is the wetlands and rice fields of Katano bordering the Sea of Japan. Although small in size, Katano attracts geese and ducks in winter including the globally-threatened Baikal Teal. Other species occurring on a regular basis include Middendorf's Bean and White-fronted Geese, Eastern Marsh

Harrier and Grey-headed Lapwing whilst rarities comprise Tundra Bean and Lesser White-fronted Geese. Along the Sea of Japan, we search for Red-necked Grebe, Ancient Murrelet and other seabirds. Woodlands around Katano hold the commoner Japanese birds and, on occasions, Chinese Grosbeak and Japanese Waxwings. On Day 10 we take the express train to Nagoya where we board a comfortable ferry bound for Tomakomai in Hokkaido. We have two nights aboard in first-class en-suite cabins.

Day 11: A whole day seawatching in the North Pacific Ocean. We can expect White-billed and Pacific Divers, Laysan Albatross, Streaked and Short-tailed Shearwaters, Ancient Murrelet, Pomarine and South Polar Skuas, Black-tailed Gull and Red-necked and Grey Phalaropes. Rarities may include Short-tailed Albatross and Tristram's Storm-petrels. We also have a chance of observing Northern Fur Seals and Pacific White-sided Dolphins.

Day 12: Before docking at Tomakomai, we may see Least Auklet and Common and Brunnich's Guillemots. Transfer to Chitose airport for an internal flight to Kushiro. On arrival we travel to Nemuro, our base for three nights. Furen-ko should provide us with Grey-headed Woodpecker, Marsh Tit and other woodland species. In Nemuro itself we may locate parties of Bohemian Waxwings.

Day 13: Our main interest today is the sheltered bays and estuaries en route to Cape Nosappu overlooking the Kurile Islands. The Nemuro Straits concentrates divers, sea ducks, gulls and alcids. We should find Pelagic Cormorant, Harlequin Duck, Spectacled Guillemot, Least Auklet and, possibly, Long-billed Murrelet. The frozen capes have Steller's and White-tailed Eagles and the harbours, Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls. In the afternoon, we visit Cape Kiritappu, an exposed peninsula jutting into the Sea of Okhotsk where a private house with feeders often has Asian Rosy Finches. Off the cape, we may see Red-necked Grebe, Red-faced Cormorant, Black and Asiatic Scoters and Long-tailed

Ducks. At the end of the day, we visit a private farm for Blakiston's Eagle Owl.

Day 14: Today, we head north towards Notsuke Hando, a remote peninsula. Odaito feeding station allows a close approach to Whooper Swans. On our journey north, we check harbours for Smew. Depending on the severity of the winter, we may find Short-eared Owl and Snow Buntings. At Notsuke Hando hundreds of Steller's Sea Eagles congregate on the ice or in bare trees, a truly spectacular sight. Also present are White-tailed Eagle, Slaty-backed and Kamchatka Gulls, Greater Scaup, Common Goldeneye and Common Mergansers. Ice-free rivers are home to Brown Dipper. If we have not managed to see Blakiston's Eagle Owl, we will make a short diversion to Rausu.

Day 15: We leave Nemuro and visit Tancho no Sato, a feeding area for Red-crowned Cranes. In January this delightful bird often dances in the snow accompanying itself with bugling calls. After this finale, we head towards Kushiro Airport for an internal flight to Tokyo and our final night in Japan.

Day 16: Transfer to Narita for our flight to Europe. Arrival is later the same day.

Prices

***Ground Price: £3,995**

Single Room: £400

Deposit: £400

**Air Fare: £1,425

This holiday is fully inclusive of international and internal flights, ferry journey, accommodation and meals, transport, guidance and taxes.

Not included: drinks, insurance, items of a personal nature, air passenger duty taxes, excess baggage and fuel surcharges.

* Prices for 2017 are provisional

** Please refer to our terms and conditions relating to flights