Why would you Visit Japan in WINTER?

On our final afternoon, we're standing at the edge of a snow-covered field in a modest little village in Hokkaido, the northernmost of the main islands of Japan. A beautiful Ballet in black and white is unfolding in front of our eyes as many graceful Japanese Red-crowned Cranes step by on their long legs, stooping occasionally to pick up a few seed grains from the snow. From time to time a pair of birds will synchronise their movements to point their beaks skywards and let out a primeval call, the vapour from their exhaled breath condensing in the freezing cold air. In perfect harmony they face each other, then jump into the air and extend their beautiful wings, the white primary feathers perfectly contrasting with the black secondaries. Other couples excited by this activity may choose to join the dance in a further flurry of activity, or perhaps another few birds may glide in to the hollow to join the birds already 'on stage'. Just as spontaneously as the movement began, the excitement evaporates and the birds return to feeding. Above all else, this spectacle is what has attracted me to Japan in the cold depths of Winter: I have always loved watching and hearing Cranes, having seen most of the fifteen species from around the world, but the rare and iconic 'dancing' cranes of Japan hold a special fascination for me! Now it was for real!

Corps de Ballet– Japanese Red-crowned Cranes

A few days earlier we had arrived from the warm spring sunshine of southern Kyushu where swallows were already hawking for insects across the rice paddy-fields. Kushiro airport is close to the marshlands where thirty-three of these iconic birds, which were already feared *extinct* in Japan, turned up one particularly cold winter in the 1950s and searched in vain for any food in the snow. The local farmers and schoolchildren began to feed the Cranes rice and corn,

not only ensuring their survival, but sparking off their devotion to these wild birds which is still evident to this day. (The recovery of the Japanese population to over 1000 birds speaks for itself.) Our first glimpse of the birds was in the cold bright sunshine at the International Crane Centre in Akan. Perhaps the most atmospheric sighting was from the bridge over the nearby Setsuri River at dawn the next day with the temperature reading a nithering –20 degrees Centigrade! Geo-thermal activity ensures that the river does not freeze over, providing a safe roosting place for the birds overnight. As the mist slowly rises, the birds emerge and disappear like ghostly phantoms in the haze and half-light. Activity increases, birds start to flap their wings and indulge in little dance manoeuvres, each gesture prompting a fusillade of sound from the array of long lens cameras. Eventually they will lift off and head out for the day, some to the original 'Tancho' village, other pairs favouring quieter places in the marshes.

Hokkaido was full of magic moments. We drove north to the wild Shiretoko Peninsula and checked into our tiny Minshuku, a little wooden hostel clinging to the edge of a steep river valley. Our only reason for choosing to stay overnight in this rather cramped, makeshift accommodation was the magnetic attraction of Blakiston's Fish Owl at one of the few places in the world where you have a reasonable chance of seeing this, the world's largest and arguably rarest Owl. A pool in the river is lit up through the night, highlighting a spot where one of the resident local Owls often chooses to drop in and bag a fish or two. Sadly but understandably, such night activity-especially the timing- is never guaranteed. He may drop in round about 8pm, or maybe 3.30am, or maybe have a night off– who can tell? If he comes, he might visit for 10 seconds or hang about for 10 minutes. With the temperature well below freezing we wait quietly and patiently in our open-sided cabin for about four hours willing the bird to put in an appearance—to no avail. As the number of 'hopefuls' dwindles, talk of rotas and vigils get us nowhere. We head to our cabin (which is not overlooking the stream) for some sleep after our long day. Suddenly there's a knock on the walls, and 'The Owl's Here' comes from the girl's cabin adjoining ours. We scramble through, but the bird has come and gone in a few seconds. One or two tantalising but poor images on mobile phones tell the tale. Despondent, we return to our room but soon drop asleep again, to be awakened about forty minutes later with more knocking on the thin wooden partition……. 'He's BACK!' This time we have a superb view of the Owl as he pounces into the pool, catches a fish and begins to eat it. A bit of preening — another visit to the pool — a look around—a shake of the feathers and he's OFF. Wow, against the odds, everyone from our group has managed to see Blakiston's!

Blakiston's Fish Owl at River Pool

Next morning, the sea and the harbour has another surprise in store for us. Overnight, the wind direction has changed; where there was water and waves yesterday, we are now looking out across mile upon mile of Pack Ice blown onto the coast and the harbour. Even now, from the coast on this bright sunny morning, we can see the dark shapes of the Eagles perched on the mini icebergs of the broken Pack Ice, our main target for this morning! From the harbour, we board a small Ice-strengthened ship which takes us out amongst the floes searching for the big birds. We quickly adjust to the fact that the White-tailed Eagles are the 'little' eagles here when compared to the massive Steller's Eagles. Barely a few hundred metres from the shore and the harbour mouth we are surrounded by over a hundred eagles of these two species. Fish is thrown onto the pack ice by the crew and the Eagles quickly swoop down to take advantage of the 'free' handout that draws them here. Squabbles, aerial piracy, landings and take-offs, it's a perpetually busy scene punctuated by the rapid clicking of the DSLRs with the big lenses every time an eagle comes close. (Fortunately a lot of the activity is well within the range of our more modest bridge cameras!) It's also a good opportunity to check out the Gulls

Steller's Sea Eagle

White-tailed Sea Eagle on the Pack Ice

too- Glaucous, Glaucous-winged, Slaty-backed and Kamchatka Gulls amongst others– who continually look out for opportunities to join in the feast without becoming part of the next course. In the shifting channels between the Pack Ice, beautiful Harlequin Ducks, *'butter-billed'* Black Scoters and Long-tailed Ducks all add to the scene, and three hours afloat pass by all too quickly.

We move on to the Easternmost point of the island a few hours drive away. Next day is spent sea watching from the harbours and headlands, including another boat trip out to the edge of the Pack Ice. The Russian Kuril Islands are less than 4 kilometres offshore, so our Japanese crew are very wary and vigilant, anxious not to stray across the border, though the auks and divers don't recognise this invisible line! Some of the telescopic 'flying specks' of the land-based morning become much more recognisable as Spectacled Guillemots, Pigeon Guillemots, Ancient Murrelets, tiny Least Auklets, a memorable Crested Auklet and a few Brünnich's Guillemots. (A bit like the difference between sea-watching from Seahouses or heading out on one of Billy Sheil's Boats to the Farnes, though the risk of straying into Russian Waters is not so likely from Northumberland)

Our birding trip started off in Tokyo with an exhilarating trip on one of Japan's Bullet trains (Shinkansen) which whisked us westward to the Japanese Alps around the former Olympic Village of Karuizawa, where we stayed in a lovely Onsen or traditional Japanese Hotel built round a hot spring close to Mount Asama, a category A volcano which last erupted in 2009, still quietly 'steaming' while we are there. Our gentle introduction to Japanese Birding was aided by a large bird feeder situated beside the thermal pool, visible through the glass front of the reception area. Nothing too daunting at this jet- lagged point; a Japanese Tit – a very pale version of our Great Tit, the endemic Japanese Accentor—which looks tolerably like ….well…..a Dunnock (but this is the ONLY place we saw it on the trip), the beautiful VARIED Tit, definitely unlike anything back home, a few Willow Tits, some Long-tailed Tits, a nuthatch, a couple of Jays , a wren and an endemic Japanese Green Woodpecker. After a meal we set off up a broad snowy forest track by a rushing stream, where the birding is a little more challenging, but hardly daunting. A dainty little Pygmy Woodpecker is climbing a tree trunk, one of several seen . One target bird here is Brown Dipper; habitat spot on, but no one has reminded the bird to put in an appearance. A shy Long-tailed Rosefinch is heard and our guides do their best to point it out where it is 'mainly hidden' a hundred metres away. It melts away……. Ah well, that's birding for you! A couple of Thrushes fly off before we have a half-decent look, the light continues to fade and we head back to our hotel.

Next morning we are off at 6 a.m. searching for the elusive endemic Copper Pheasant , one of two endemic Pheasants on the MUST SEE list. We slowly follow the Old Road winding down from the Olympic Village, checking the

steep wooded slope. We stop quite often, for flocks of Brambling, for a Red-flanked Bluetail, several Hawfinches, a couple of Japanese Grosbeaks with their large bright yellow beaks, etc. Then Craig, our guide, spots a well camouflaged Copper Pheasant on the banking….and another…. indeed the are four birds. Using the walkie-talkie, he alerts the second vehicle and we all watch for five minutes without leaving the vehicle until the birds disappear further up the slope. We return for breakfast then set off the rest of the day to a good Reservoir and River, where Smew, Long-billed Plover, Bull-headed Shrike and Daurian Redstart were the most memorable finds. The most unexpected find in the afternoon was a flock of 15 Pallas's Rosefinches in the coniferous woodland as we climbed the Hill Road leading up the side of Mt Asama. Now there are Rosefinches and **ROSE**finches, and these Siberian migrants are certainly by far the brightest coloured of the three different species we see on the trip.

A birding holiday in Japan is about much more than the birds. Staying in traditional Japanese Onsens, our meals are of Japanese food served in the Japanese way and eaten with chopsticks throughout our stay. An evening meal may consist of up to ten separate beautifully presented small dishes, which arrive somewhat faster than you can deal with them, but you quickly learn how to work through each choice morsel, sometimes combining items. Not everyone in our party appreciates green vegetables at breakfast, with raw fish, maybe some seaweed and Mizu, and some folk long for, say, a slice of toast towards the end of our fortnight . I certainly enjoyed the food and the total experience.

Three 'courses' of a traditional Japanese

Evening Meal

The hot springs were not to be missed either. These are segregated; one enters naked, with a little towel about the size of a face cloth to hold in front of you if you are shy or modest. You must wash thoroughly then rinse off all traces of soap and shampoo before entering the slightly sulphurous naturally heated waters of the pool, your little towel folded and placed on your head so that it likewise doesn't contaminate the natural spring waters. Next up is the shock of leaving the hot pool and immersing yourself in the cold plunge…… our gentle Japanese guide Otani explains to me that you should keep still until your limbs are covered in little bubbles, by which time you will feel a 'warm glow' from within. Then it's back to the hot pool. Some move from one pool to the other *three* times……. *one* shock to the system per night was plenty for me, but there's no doubt you feel re-energised after a long day in the field, and ready for your evening meal.

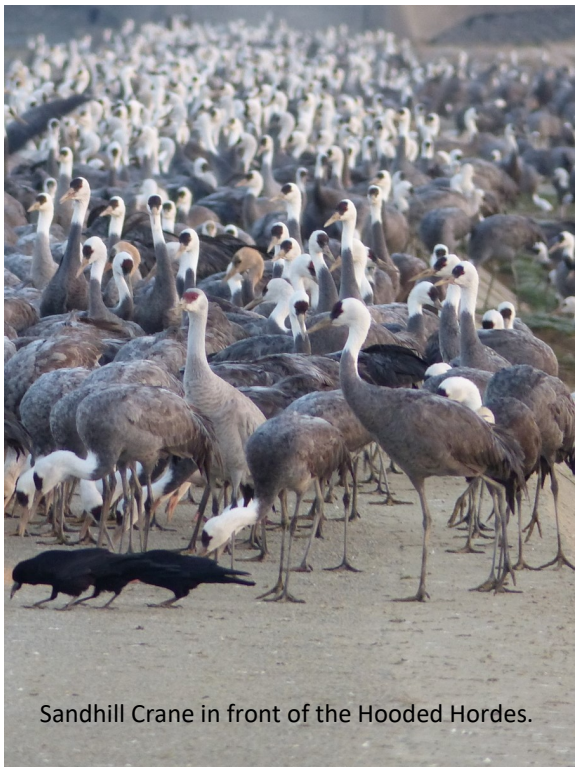
Our next day picks up a few birds such as Azure-winged Magpie, but our main species today is a mammal, a visit to the famous Japanese Macaques or 'Snow Monkeys'; like us, they have also discovered the pleasure of sitting around in Hot Springs at Jigoku-dani.

As we head west for several hours the volume of snow lying in the fields becomes noticeably thicker, and soon we are in quite heavy snow. The car park is treacherous, the two-kilometre trail through the woods to the thermal pools hazardous and tricky in places, but it's all 'worth it' when you get there. Perhaps a dozen monkeys are immersed in the pool, adults and youngsters, males dominating favoured spots, mothers clutching their tiny babies tightly. More are out digging in the snow, others climbing the conifers, a few playful youngsters chasing one another. Some are grooming others, a few squabbles and minor confrontations erupt, but keeping warm in the pool seems to be the favourite activity. The light fades as we carefully wend our way back down the track to begin the long return journey to our Hotel for our own thermal soak!

A long drive across Honshu to the snowy west coast provides a couple of days to engage with such species as the endemic Green Pheasant, Bewick and Whooper Swans, White-fronted Geese and two attractive wintering ducks, the rare Baikal Teal and the Falcated Duck at Katano Kamo-ike, a fabulous wetland reserve. A somewhat cold, miserable morning with sea fret and intermittent snow showers was not the best for sea watching from Kasa Point, reached via a steep muddy track, but we eventually picked up a line of eight Pacific Divers, plus a few Red-throated and Black-throated Divers on the ocean. Various far distant hazy dots were claimed as this or that…….. but by this time our little 'flock' of birdwatchers had dwindled to 'very few' as the relative warmth of the minibus won out against the wet and the cold! Thankfully next day, a short flight to the southern Island of Kyushu miraculously transfers us from winter to Spring, with warm bright sunshine to greet us on arrival. Our journey continues southward in our new minibuses, with a welcome stop at the Yatsushiro Estuary, where the mudflats have a large Gull Roost and attract many thousands of Waders.

Hooded Cranes at Arasaki

Our next major destination — the Wetlands and Rice Paddyfields of Arasaki at the southern end of Kyushu, a major wintering area for several species of Cranes; Asian species included several thousand of the smaller Hooded Cranes and two or three hundred of the very elegant White-naped Cranes, with a few vagrant North American Sandhill Cranes and even a couple of Eurasian Common Cranes which had also obviously strayed well off course. We were staying for a couple of nights in the simple accommodation at the Crane Centre right in the heart of the reserve. Before dawn the birds begin to move out from the safety of the roost to gather in the Rice stubble fields where they feed on fallen rice grains plus some supplementary feeding spread along the access tracks. The sight and sound of the birds as they fly back and forth is quite magical. Soon they will disperse more widely across the region to other good feeding areas, but return as dusk falls to the safety of the protected roosting areas. The Reedy Wetlands and stubble fields also prove very productive area s throughout the day, with a good variety of interesting species, including Kingfishers, excellent views of a Ruddy-breasted Crake, and...after a considerable search


Sandhill Crane in front of the Hooded Hordes.

….. about 20 beautiful little Penduline Tits working their way up and down the reeds at the edge of the river. Just before sunset, we positioned ourselves close to the edge of the roosting area to watch and listen to the returning cranes– their wild calls resounding as black silhouettes glided down against the deep blue sky, undercarriage ready anticipating the moment when legs make contact with the ground and the wings open to counteract the forward momentum. At least half an hour passed by of near continuous arrivals, until the light gradually gave way to the darkness……..

We spent two more days enjoying the warmth of the Spring weather in the highland area of Mi-ike Crater Lake. We enjoyed seeing quite a few Buntings, such as the pretty Meadow Bunting with its 'mint humbug' head pattern and the aptly named Elegant Bunting, but one species was set to test our guides let alone our will to live– the Grey Bunting. The field guide description of a 'rather plain dark grey bunting with no white in the tail…… uncommon and local, preferring dense shady cover where quite skulking' . Its quiet call, if heard, may suggest it's some distance up a steep shady bank with limited viewing possibilities, where the chance of seeing it is quite minimal let alone leading a posse of birdwatchers to wards its location. However Craig, our guide, loves a challenge and spent many hours patiently following up the call in different locations until hearing *yet another one* late afternoon and sensing one which *might ...just might...maybe*?.....*keep really still and quiet*…….. suddenly a little dark bird moves in the shadows, jumps on to a low branch and sits in the shadows for a second or two…. then flies further back into the undergrowth and away. I suspect that's maybe as good as it ever gets for Grey Bunting.

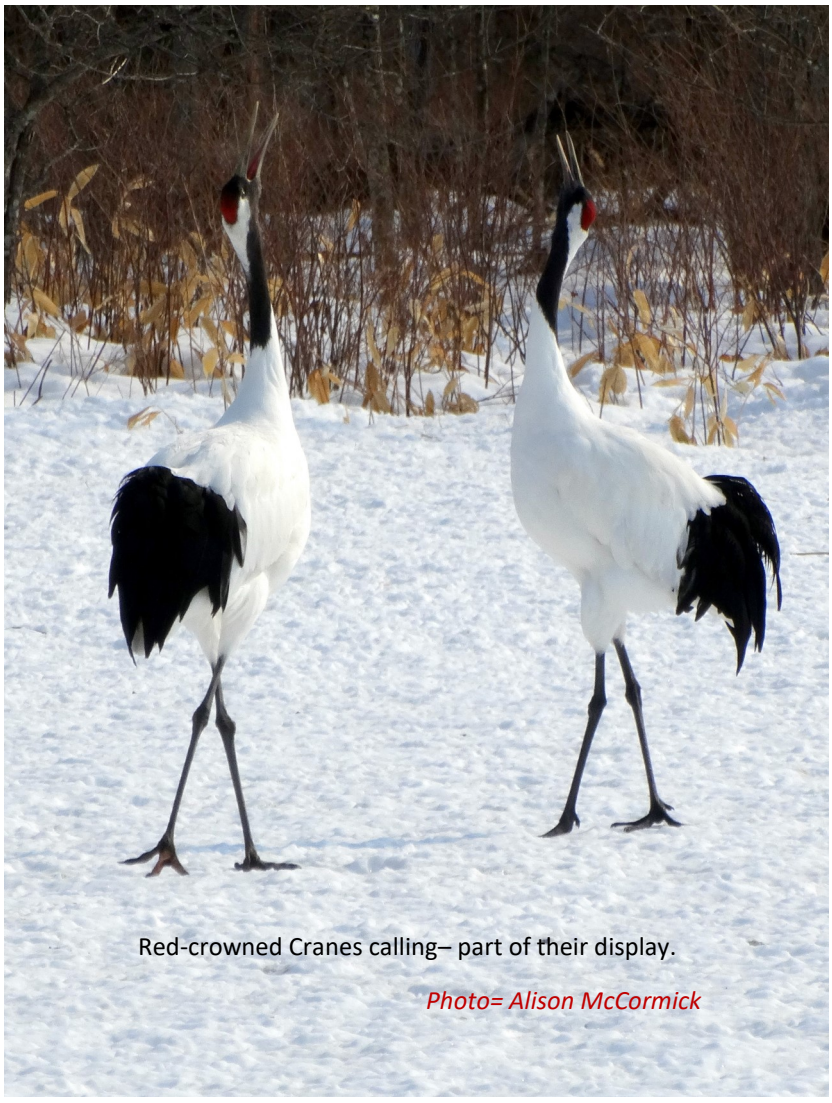
Hopefully something of the excitement and enjoyment, even a little of the occasional frustration, comes through my account of our Birding Holiday, without listing every bird or every event. Of the 170 species we recorded, over sixty were completely new to me (so-called 'lifers') and many others are species such as Harlequin Duck , Red-necked Stint, even Pacific Diver (of recent Northumberland fame) which you don't expect to come across too often in a lifetime. And other tales of endemics such as Ryukyu Minivet, Red-faced Cormorant, or the special boat trip we took for close views of the rare Japanese Murrelet will have to wait for another opportunity.

Stewart McCormick

Two elegant White-naped Cranes in flight at Asasaki, Kyushu.

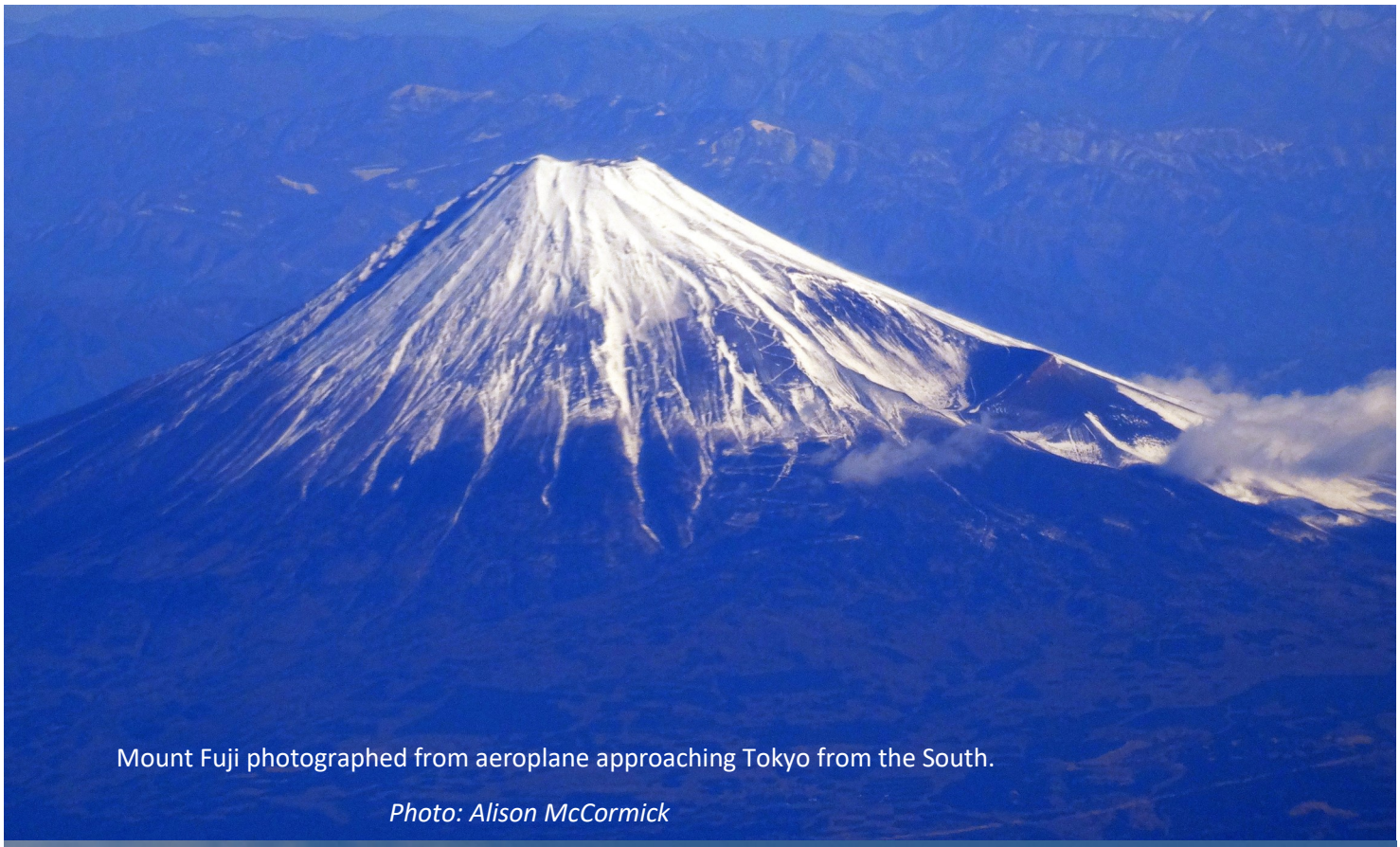
'Dancing' Red-crowned Cranes

Red– crowned Crane Roost in the Setsuri River



Red-crowned Cranes calling– part of their display.

Photo= Alison McCormick



Mount Fuji photographed from aeroplane approaching Tokyo from the South.

Photo: Alison McCormick

Volcanic Mount Asama in the Japanese Alps near Karuizawa, smouldering gently…….