

## Japan, 8 – 26 January 2010

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Tired of the Norwegian winter, and in the quest of doing some nature photography, it was finally time to visit Japan. Most days were spent photographing, and very little time was actually devoted to pure birding. My goal for the trip was to get decent photos of the following species; Hooded- and White-naped crane spectacle in Izumi (Arasaki), the Red-crowned cranes in Tsurui, Hokkaido, Harlquinducks, Steller sea-eagle, Japanese macaque (snow monkey) bathing, and to see at least one short-tailed albatross. The Norwegian and Japanese avifauna has a lot of similarities, so a lot of the species many others struggles for was not very important for me to see on this trip. If you are not into photography, this same trip could probably be done within 10 days. Keep this in mind while reading this report.

**Timing:** January is a bit early for the drift ice to arrive properly in Hokkaido. This means you will not have the chance to photograph Stellers sea eagles on the ice, and there are less alcids around. However, travelling in January means you will have most places to your self, and you will anyway see most of the species that you get in February. I saw and photographed a lot of steller sea eagles on land, but I admittedly scored low on the alcids. Everywhere I stayed, I had most of the places to myself. Unless, photographing eagles in the drift ice is really a must for you, I have no problem recommending January as a good time to visit Japan. The drift ice is anyway not 100% certain in February, so either way it will have a certain amount of gamble in it. Mid February, the cranes starts to leave from Kyushu, so peak time for cranes in the south is January.

**Money:** Most hotels, restaurants etc don't accept foreign credit cards. Japan is very much still a cash based society, and it is a must to carry a lot of cash. I also heard that most of the ATMs don't accept foreign issued credit cards. However, I used a VISA, and this worked in 7/11 kiosks at the "Seven bank's" ATM even though Lonely Planet states that they stopped accepting foreign issued credit cards. I also draw luck with the first and only ATM I tried at the Narita international airport where I got most of the money I needed for the whole trip. I had big problem getting money in an earlier trip to South Korea, so I was a bit nervous for the money part before arriving Japan. However, I got money in 2 out of 2 ATMs I tried, so I am not really sure how big an issue this is anymore in Japan. I anyway heard that ATM in post offices always accept foreign issued cards, and post offices are in every little village. JPY 1000 was worth about USD10 on my visit.

Japan also has its own cell phone system, so your mobile phone doesn't necessarily work inside the the country. It is possible to rent phones at the airport, but I didn't try this service.

**Car:** I used "Nippon Rent a Car", and payed about JPY55000 for 9 days in Hokkaido. JPY 33000 for 5 days in the south (Kagoshima area). International driving licence is a must when picking up the car. In total I drove only about 3000km on the whole trip. All cars come with Japanese language GPS and you can conveniently put in the phone number of your accomodation to let your GPS guide you there. Driving is on left side, and speed limits in the south are for the most 50km/hr which make sense when you see the narrow and zigzagging roads. However, in Hokkaido it makes no sense driving in 50 and it can be quite frustrating some times when roads are straight and wide. Be prepared to drive on ice and snow, especially in Hokkaido. I recommend to specifically ask for winter tires also in the south as there is no surprise with snow in higher areas as Miike Lake. See later.

**Flights:** If you want to explore the corners of Japan with limited time on hand, you need some domestic flights. Important to remember is that you can get a "Welcome to Japan pass", which means you get each flight for JPY11500 (Air Nippon) and JPY12500 (Japan air) which is the two main airlines in the country. These special fares is only available if you book tickets before entering the country, and outside major holidays! I used Air Nippon (Star alliance partner) since I arrived in Japan with a Star alliance partner (Lufthansa). The stretch Kagoshima via Haneda to Kushiro is considered two legs, and hence costs JPY23000.

**Booking:** Since I was warned about most websites being in Japanese only, I arranged with an London based agent "Birding Japan" to book all accomodation, ferry and car rentals on before hand. Tommy at Birding Japan is extremely helpful, and gave me a lot of valuable information in the planning phase of the trip. He knows the area well, and is well worth the booking fee of £10 / booking he charges. Email: [booking@japanbirdwatching.com](mailto:booking@japanbirdwatching.com) However, the flights needs to be booked by yourself, and train tickets are no problem to buy in the many ticket offices at the train stations in Japan.

**Food:** Usually both raw and cooked fish are served. If you are fan of sushi, you will certainly have a good time! I'm not. I usually also got some sort of meat and rice, together with various food items I never managed to identify.

**Other:** English is poorly, or mostly not spoken at all. However, finding your way around is easy as the signs are both in Japanese and English. This also applies for the announcements made on trains and busses. Despite that I don't know a single word of Japanese, Japan was all in all one of the easiest countries I have ever travelled in,

The Japanese is a polite and friendly people, almost to an extent that is annoying. You never know when they are polite, or just sincerely happy. However, there are obviously certain cultural differences which seem strange at first to a Westerner. I probably offended a lot of people on my way, but I hereby appologize to every single one of you that I might have caused discomfort to.

Some tip: Always leave your shoes before you enter up one step in a hallway. And, when leaving your shoes – don't step with your socks on the same level as your shoes are placed. This is considered one the most rud things you can do in Japan! Inside, you usually have slippers on, and don't forget that entering the bathroom requires its own slippers. Never give money directly into the hand of the cashier, but put them down in the "basket". If paying with a credit card, always give and receive it with two hands! And obviously, you don't put it directly into your pocket or wallet, but keep it in the air for a certain amount of time which endurance I don't know exactly.....You never take a soap into an onsen (hot spring). Onsen is purely for relaxing! Last but not the least, enjoy the heated toilet seats, and the refreshing and automatically wash of your hind afterwards!

Species names and subspecies follow M.Brazil 2009, *Birds of East Asia*.

## **The trip day by day**

### **6 jan 2010**

Departure home at 19:00, flight 20:45 with Norwegian to Gardermoen, Oslo. Spent the night at Gardermoen on a soft bench 22:00 – 06:25 next morning.

### **7 Jan 2010**

Flight Lufthansa 06:25 to Frankfurt, arrival 08:35, and then 10hr flight with Lufthansa 13:30 arriving Narita airport (Tokyo) at 09:20 local time 8 January (missed a day somewhere in the air...). The rare event of lack of German precision made this 40 minutes delayed compared to scheduled. This made me almost miss my flight to Kagoshima in southern Japan (Kyushu). After getting all the cash needed for the whole trip (just opposite for tourist information in the arrival hall in the south wing, 1st floor hidden behind stairs there are several ATM and at least the one I tried managed foreign issued cards), and finding a bookstore in 4th floor that sold bilingual Japan Road Atlas 1:250 000 (Hokkaido only 1:600 000) (JPY3000) and Tokyo train and subway maps for free at tourist information in 1st floor I managed to buy Limousine bus transfer ticket at the stand 30m from the tourist info. I then spent 1hr 10 minutes on the bus from Narita to Haneda with no traffic. Feral pigeon, Black eared kite and Common buzzard (japonicus) as the first trip species. At Haneda I arrived 30 minutes before scheduled departure, and was welcomed by a white wagtail (lugens) and then checked in 20 minutes before departure. Arrived gate 1 minute before boarding. Perfect timing!

1hr 45 minute airborne, I then arrived to Kagoshima 14:20 and then contacted car rental desk in arrival hall. "Nippon rent a car" staff picked me up for the 30 seconds ride to the care rental offices which is actually just across the road opposite for the arrival exit. Its a small highway (actually road 504 which conveniently takes you almost all the way to Izumi), so a bit difficult to cross with lots of lugage. Got my small car. GPS all in Japanese, but the non-English speaking lady showed me how to put phone number of Izumi wing hotell in Izumi. Hopefully I managed to do it myself for the next accomodation. After paying JPY33500 for the small car that just fitted my backpack and myself (only basic insurance which means JPY50000 excess fee opposite to JPY30 000 if one paid JPY1000 extra/day for Collision Dammage Weaver, CDW). Drove slowly (which is the only way) on the narrow zigzag roads, and spent almost 2 hours to Izumi including a short stop at a nice looking river next to the road which added long billed plover (3), common sandpiper, grey and japanese wagtail. Many large-billed crows along the road. I followed rd 504 all the way until rd 328 and then followed this road into Izumi. A short drive at dusk to get myself familiar with the area for an early start next morning for photographing cranes. I stayed at a western style Izumi Wing Hotel (JPY 5500, no food included) just opposite to Izumi train station. Small, but nice room with tv.

### **9.jan, Arasaki**

Arasaki all day. Note: There are two crane centers....one is signposted "crane center" and is situated in Izumi itself and the other "resting place for cranes". The latter is the one where the birds are! Cranes is a big thing in Izumi, and you find signs showing your way to the feeding area all over town. The feeding area is about 15 minutes drive from Izumi. Sunrise at 07:00, but the area around the crane observation center is closed until proper light (08:00). However, there is another fenced area close to the seawall north of the river, only about 1 km away,

where the cranes nightroost and which is open early morning to see the large flocks taking off towards the feeding area. Crane photo all day, but some birding 13 – 15:30 along the fields south of river. The fields were actually packed with birds, only to be discovered when walked across the fields.

Expensive dinner (JPY2300) at Izumi Wing Hotell. Sausage, and two other things I didn't really figure out what was. It tasted ok. Sunny and 13 celsius. 4 lifers, (crested kingfisher, dusky thrush, hooded crane, zitting cisticolas (only ones on the trip) and red bellied subspecies of blue rock thrush). Heard a lot of what presumably was japanese bush warbler and some presumed dusky warblers but not seen well enough to id for certain.

### **10.jan, Arasaki**

Started checking fields east of road 3, lots of meadow buntings. Then crane photography until 13:00. Tasted some different food samples I don't know what was from a stand outside the crane observation center – did not taste good! Forgot my camera inside when buying myself a birdbook...luckily I am in Japan with nice people and I found it back behind the counter ten minutes later. Saw all the star birds of today at the night roost for cranes which involved Common and Sandhill crane and two black-faced spoonbills. Cloudy weather, so no evening sun for flight shots of the cranes. I therefore ended the day before dark, and had a nice meal at Mc Donalds (24hr service).

### **11. jan, Arasaki**

Cloudy and light rain most of the day, ment bad conditions for photography. Much of the day used to search the fields for green pheasant without luck. Japanese bush warbler in reeds next to the "pigfarm" and japanese green woodpecker in a forested hill at the sea were birds of today and both lifers and new for the trip. Ate some combo at KFC and paid JPY680.

### **12.jan, Arasaki og Miike lake**

Cloudy and light rain in the morning. Morning until 10:30 was spent photographing cranes. Left Arasaki at 12:00 for a 2hr and 15 minutes drive to Lake Miike along route 447, which had a small section which were extremely narrow and zigzagging. Impossible for two cars to meet except at the meeting points, where the road was widened a bit. A new road is under construction but will probably take a while to finish in this terrain. Exciting and beautiful landscape indeed, with old forest and hilly terrain. From 447 on to 221, and followed this road until 223. Note: On the map, there are two Miike lake, you want to take the one that is situated along road 223 and actually signposted from Kobayashi town. Follow 223 until an extremely large sign showing you to Miike campsite. Birded the trail going off to the right at the bottom of the steep hill on the entrance road to the campsite from 14:30 until 17. Then in the dusk, I manage to pick out 4 Baikal teals on the lake which actually was impossible to identify with my binoculars. As I zoomed in with my digital camera, it showed 2 males and 2 females! In the forest, there were woodpeckers everywhere (white backed and japanese pygmy) and brown-eared bulbuls were annoyingly common. Came across one real nice bird party with Ryuku minivet, Treecreeper, Long-tailed tit flock and more. I also saw some sort of deer three times. Hoped for a Copper pheasant, but luck was not on my side. In dusk, I drove 20 minutes in the direction of Kirishima to Kirishima Royal hotell which is gigantic and the largest hotell I've ever seen. Only the east wing was open and a nice western style room cost me JPY 5000 (no food included). Several restaurants in 2nd floor (japanese, chinese, french). The hotell is situated about 2km on a side road going off to the left from road 223, about 5 minutes drive before you get to Kirishima shrine (the shrine is big and

signposted from road 223) coming from Miike. The hotels are only signposted in Japanese, so a bit confusing to find without GPS.

### **13.jan Miike lake and flight to Kushiro**

Up a bit too late, and was surprised to find 3 cm of snow on the ground. Luckily I had requested winter tyres on my car in the booking, which I now was glad to find out my car actually was equipped with. Never too late to check these things...Ice and snow on the road was no problem for me, but take care anyway since most of the other cars on the road used summer tyres. On the 15km stretch to Miike lake from the hotel I saw 3 cars off the road. The Japanese drive very slowly, so there was no big damage. However, getting a lorry in the front will probably not be your most fun thing to do in Japan. The snow made the landscape extremely pretty! So no complaints from me. I guess this was just to make the transit to Hokkaido later in the day, become a bit more smooth. Only 1,5hr birding at lake Miike (lake trail) before I had to leave for the airport. Japanese grosbeaks, Ryuku minivet (together with a flock of Long-tailed tit again...seems like its worth checking the Long-tailed tit flocks extra carefully as the minivet tend to follow them). A few Olive-backed pipits at the campsite in the open and not shy as I am used to was also nice, even though I had to realise I put in too little time for Miike birding to see Copper pheasant (Grey bunting was also a target species here which I didnt see). Actually, I think the entrance road to the campsite looks pretty damn fine for birding as long as there is little traffic. The forest along this road looks nice, and you are able to walk much more silently on the black tar than on the leaves covering the forest trails. Lots of birds here as well, seen only from the car on the way in (a flock of about 10 Red billed pleiotrix amongst other nice birds). Leaving Miike for about 1hr drive with snow in the air and ice on the road from Miike lake to Kagoshima airport. Drove road 223 towards Kirishima and then a shortcut (signposted) on to road 65 to 504. Kagoshima airport is signposted from about 10km from Miike lake. Delivered car and then checked in 30 minutes before departure for Kushiro via Haneda. About 30 km drive (45minutes) drive in the dark from Kushiro airport to my stay for the night at Hickory Wind Wilderness Lodge which is run by Mr. Makoto Ando and his wife. Makoto is also a certified natureguide (who speaks English) for the area. First impression was great! (JPY10500/night including very tasty dinner and breakfast).

### **14.jan, Tsurui**

Spent the whole day in the Tsurui area and at Tancho no Sato. I started the day at the "red bridge" named Otawa bridge, together with lots of other photographers as usual. Neither cold or a nice sunrise meant no good for photography this morning. From the bridge, I continued 10 minutes to Tsurui dai (situated along rd 53). Here, an old lady has been feeding cranes in her garden for many years. Today, she has about 90 cranes feeding in her garden. From there I continued along road 53 towards Tsurui village. Followed the brown signs (a few hundred meters before Tsurui village) to Ito Sanctuary which is actually the nearest neighbour to Hickory Wind Wilderness lodge (situated at the end of the small road passing the parking to Ito Sanctuary). I then went the 30 minutes drive to Tancho no Sato to witness the most bizarre birding experience I had in Japan. At Tancho no Sato, they feed the cranes with fish every day at 14:00. This also attracts red foxes, and about 15 white-tailed eagles who fight the cranes for the fish. The entrance ticket for this 15 minute spectacle is JPY400. Two stellers sea-eagles flew overhead, but didn't dare to come down to take the fish. About 70 Red-crowned cranes and some whooper swans also seen. On the way back to the accomodation, I saw lots of Sika deer.

### **15.jan, Tsurui**

Started at about 07:00 at the Ottawa bridge. Conditions much better for photography today as it was clear skies and minus 22 degrees, which meant lots of hoar frost on the trees and steam coming up from the river. Stellers sea-eagle in the trees by the river. Because of the cold, most of the cranes remain in the river much longer and didn't arrive Ito sanctuary before 11:00. As the day warmed up, the cranes started to move as well. So did I, as I went to Tancho no Sato for another 15 minutes of bizarre birding experience with the feeding (at 14:00) of the eagles and cranes and foxes. Again a Stellers sea-eagle over the area, but didn't come down to feed. Two foxes, about 10 White-tailed eagles and 15 black-eared kites. I then drove (3hrs, 130 km) to Lake Furhen and Furhen Ko where I was met by Take Matsuo and his wife for an excellent dinner and some interesting bird talk. I was the only guest this night. Turnoff to Fuhren Ko is a backwards small road off R44 in a long right turn as you come from direction from Kushiro. Fuhren Ko is on the eastern end of Fuhren lake. Outside his house is a small sign which says Fuhren and some Japanese script underneath.

### **16.jan, Nemuro peninsula**

Started with an English breakfast at 07:00, and then left for a boat trip from Hadomai to Nossapu point (JPY3000). It lasted for 1.5hr. Despite the really bad conditions (1-2m waves, minus 12 degrees Celsius and gale force wind) there were quite many birds around as well as a single Harbour porpoise. The cold wind made the skin feel like burning, so take care against frost bites on such a trip. They seem to focus on alcids in this trip, and I saw a lot of Spectacled guillemot, a few Ancient murrelet and one Tufted puffin. On a calm day, I would certainly recommend this trip. The rest of the day was spent searching for photo opportunities of Harlequin ducks in all the different harbours along the peninsula. The beautiful ducks were plenty and everywhere, but shy and difficult to get close to. Saw a single Asian rosy finch in one of the harbours. Searching the nightroost for Red-faced cormorants at the rock stack close to the light house at the tip of the peninsula gave only lots of Pelagic cormorants as well as a couple of Sea otters. Another night at Furhen Ko.

### **17.jan, Nemuro - Rausu**

Working my way northwards along R243 becoming 244 towards Rausu (Shiritoko peninsula) checking for Harlequin duck photo possibilities along the road. Harlequins everywhere, but still shy and difficult to get close to (100 m). Surprise spot a bit south of Shinsoku, where tame whooper swans and pintail made a nice stop for photography with the aid of white bread. Arriving Washi-no-Yado at 17:00 (about 6 km east of Rausu). Ate a nice dinner and was ready for action at the river from 18:30 (JPY8000/night, dinner and breakfast included). Another car with some Japanese tourists also arrived. The lady (speaks only few words English) said the owls usually come around 19 if I understood her correctly. About 13 minus degrees and 6 hours later, there were no owls to be seen or heard. Freezing and tired I gave up, and retreated to my room where I put out my mattresses and had a nice sleep.

### **18.jan, Rausu**

Started the day by listening to Brown dippers arguing about something, and then ate a nice western style breakfast. "Talked" to the lady, and arranged for me to come back in the evening for another try for the owls. The day spent in all the harbours of Shiritoko peninsula north of Rausu trying to do Harlequin duck photography with only partial luck. At about 12, the fishing boat started to arrive in Rausu harbour with today's catch. Quite bizarre when eagles taking fish inside the harbour, and thousands of gulls of delicate species like Slaty backed dominating the flocks over Glaucous and Glaucous-winged gulls. A few common gulls were also present. Checked in at my Hotel Marumi (Tallest building on Shiritoko, about

10 km west of Rausu, JPY8400/night including dinner and breakfast), where I ate a seafood dinner of different items I did not identify. Did the instructions from the lady at Washi-no-Yado, and put the fish into the dam and floodlights on at 18:30 for another try for the owls. As the hours went by, I really started to think that I was to become the very first to dip out on these famous owls. I had the place to myself, and as the frost started to work its way into my bones I set a deadline to 23:00. At 22:00 I started to hear some deep hoots (reminding of a bittern) behind the houses. Had my suspicions, but didn't really know if it was a deer or an owl calling since it wasn't the standard call given in books. 22:21 a huge, giant owl came gliding from behind my car and sat in the tree 30 meters away – big relief! It quickly flew down next to the small pond where I gently had put the fish out. A few minutes later, another owl came next to it! They caught two fishes each, and then disappeared upstream at about 22:45. Madness! I figured it will take a long time before they become hungry again, so I went out and turned off the floodlight and went back to my hotell, where I had arranged the staff to put out fish for the eagles next morning.

### **19.jan, Notsuke peninsula**

Up just before sunrise to be ready for eagles feeding on fish outside the hotell. About 200 gulls and 20 crows, but no eagles came to my bate. Gave up at about 10:00, had a seafood breakfast(!) and drove down to Notsuke peninsula. Two distant alcids resting at sea were most certainly Long-billed murrelets, but just a bit too far away to be totally sure of the id. As I worked my way out the peninsula, the numbers of Stellers sea eagles started to increase. This was of course another of my photography targets on the trip, and I realised they were just waiting for the fishing boats to come in. Perfect light conditions, and eagles at 30 meters distance made a nice prize for the effort. Got my sunset images, and then returned to Marumi hotel after dark. Another seafood dinner, but this time at least two items were cooked (not a big fan of sushi....). Late evening spent preparing a slideshow presentation for tomorrow at Tsurui.

### **20.jan, Rausu - Tsurui**

Tried again feeding eagles with fish outside Marumi hotell without any luck. 4 White-tailed eagles came perching on nearby rocks, but never came on the fish. I saw some pictures, and sometimes, the eagles do indeed come to the fish put out by the hotel staff. When they do, this place will be good for photography and in particular flight shots. After breakfast, I started the drive from Rausu at 10:00 to be sure to reach Tancho no Sato at feeding time at 14:00. Drove the coastal road from Rausu to Shibetsu and then turned right onto 272. A brief stop at a stake out for dayroosting ural owl just to confirm that it didn't use the roosting site today either. Then followed the GPS for Tsurui onto a green road (no name on map, but I think 83 as far as my remembering goes), which briefly became road 243 before it continued southwest. Then a right turn onto 274 and onto 53 (green road with no name on map) signposted to Tsurui. Followed this until a right turn onto 243 a few kilometers beyond Tsurui village and then over the hills again and a right turn onto 240 until Tancho no Sato 2 km up the road in good time for the feeding time. This route is much quicker than the coastal road to Kushiro via Nemuro. Very nice, and straight roads which make overtaking the few cars you meet easy make this road much quicker than the alternative coastal road. You can actually drive European style (80 – 100 km/hr) almost all the way without any problem (even though speedlimit is set ridiculously slow at 50 km/hr even on these nice roads). From Rausu to Tancho no Sato I spent 2hr30 minutes on the 141km drive). Again a bizarre birding experience at Tancho no Sato before a short stop at Ito sanctuary and then checking in at its nearest neighbour at Hickory Wind Wilderness lodge where I was scheduled to keep a slide show presentation in the evening.

## **21.jan, Tsurui – Jigokudani Koen (Nagano)**

Most of all a travel day, but I started early so I could have a look at the nearby (15minutes drive) Kottoro Marshland which Makoto (owner of Hickory lodge) warmly recommended me. The area looked very nice, but maybe not so interesting during winter (supposed to be a good spot for short-eared owls from late January onwards). Lots of deer roadside and even a lot of deer carcasses which is actually roadkills put out from nearby area. These carcasses attracted lots of crows, a few black-eared kites and also overflying stellers sea eagle and white-tailed eagle. An overflying Great-grey shrike and a few flocks of coal tit where new trip species. Then 11:30 flight from Kushiro to Haneda before taking monorail from basement of Haneda airport to Hatchumatsuo station where I changed onto JR railway (Yamato line) to Tokyo station from where I took the express train "Shinkansen" to Nagano at 15:00 (arriving Nagano 16:45). All tickets bought at information desk in arrival hall at Haneda airport and the whole pleasure did cost JPY7500. From Nagano station I took east exit and found bus stop nr 3 where I got onto a bus bound for Shiga Kogen (two last departure from Nagano is 18:00 and 21:00). I jumped off about 45 minutes later at the bus stop named Shinbayashi onsen. All train stations and bus stops are announced in Japanese and English. I was booked into Korakukan Inn which is a minshuku style hotell only 5 minutes walk from Jigokudani monkey park where I was going to spend the next two days photographing "snow monkeys". An immensely impractical choice of accomodation as there are no road to Korakukan during wintertime. A 30 minutes walk if you manage to take the right road/trail. I didn't! First I started off good with taking a right turn up the hill about 100m down the road from the bus stop. Followed the road for 300m and came to a big board with a map where it said "Jigokudani 2,4km" . Then up the very badly snow cleared road preety steep and then I probably should have gone straight into what looked like a road construction site (and blocked with a lot of "no entrance signs"). Instead I followed the road in a sharp right turn and then after some more steep hills and 10 minutes later I arrived at something that looked like a ski jumping hill in the dark. A very narrow trail went off the road to the left here but the wider and more inviting road continued in a right turn and had a lot of footprints on it. I chose to ignore a very small sign for "Monkey park" with an arrow down this narrow trail (since the first big board map indicated the monkey park situated at the end of the road). With 20 kg backpack on the back and 15 kilo backpack with cameragear on the stomach I chose the wider road that continued up the hill and beyond a small gate. From here it started to feel like an expedition, and I felt very much like in the book I chose for this trip (Bill Bryson "a walk in the wood", where he brilliantly describes the challenges for a non outdoor person on a long hike along the Appalachian trail in the US). Well, after about 45 minutes uphill I started to hear monkeys scream way down in the valley and I figured I must have gone wrong after all. With snow blowing in my face and in pitch darkness I retraced my steps (or more sliding on the snow actually) until I reached the small sign and the narrow trail again. Went down this trail with some difficulties (steep and slippery ice) and soon found my self on the much wider trail that looked much more promising. No more hills and about 20 minutes walk later I finally found Korakukan Inn at about 21:00, where all doors were locked. Luckily the chef was in the kitchen doing the dishes, and heard me knocking on the door. I was served a late dinner, and showed to the tatami room where I had a long wanted rest. In short, If you have suitcases or heavy lugage, I would strongly suggest you to stay at one of the many Ryokan and Minshuku near the main road and rather take the 30min walk in early morning including some forest birding along the trail to Jigokudani monkey park (opens about 8:30 and close 15:30 a bit variation according to season). Korakukan Inn costs JPY12500/night including dinner and breakfast).

### **22.jan, Jigokudani Koen**

All day photographing the endemic monkeys at the onsen. A Golden eagle flying over the valley was virtually the only bird identified today. Entrance to the monkey park (which seems to be closed on Thursdays if I understood the sign correctly) costs JPY500. In January opening hours is 08:30 to 16:30. Another night at Korakukan Inn which is only 3 minutes walking away from the entrance.

### **23.jan, Jigokudani Koen**

Again, all day photographing monkeys. A nice Alpine accentor at the monkey onsen was very nice. An evening walk on the trail along the river gave Japanese accentor and Red flanked bluetail as new trip species. Also a couple of Meadow buntings in the dry grass. Another night at Korakukan Inn.

### **24.jan, Naka Karuizawa - Hoshino onsen**

Started the day by walking down to civilisation, and took the first bus from Kanbayashi onsen bus stop towards Nagano station (09:00). After the 50 minutes bus ride (JPY1300), I then took a Shinkansen train to Karuizawa (note; not all trains stop at Karuizawa) which took me 50 minutes and cost about JPY3400. From Karuizawa (not Naka Karuizawa) station I took a taxi from just outside the station to Hoshino hotel (15 minutes, JPY3000). The driver knew about the hotel, and once I showed him my bird book, he drove me to the start of the "bird trail" which is signposted just next to the hotel (opposite side of river). I was then birding the 3,5km long trail/small road both ways along the right side of the river. I found the first 1,5km best for birding and also saw Copper pheasant sprinting over the hill top after about 1km, in a long left turn where the first large concrete wall is on the right side of the road. On the way back I went up a trail which was going in the direction where the pheasant ran. Shortly after, I again heard leaf moving and again saw the pheasant sprinting. This time only the silhouette. I heard another running together with him. Reading different trip reports, the Karuizawa area seems to me a much more reliable site for this species than Miike lake south in Kyushu. Even though I spent the midday period (11:30 – 16:00) along this forest road on a Sunday, I only met one other person hiking in the area and found the birding to be very good with most forest species I had seen earlier on the trip also seen here. Hawfinch was new on the trip. Walked along the river all the way down to Naka Karuizawa station (1,5 km) in hope to find green pheasant in the gardens, but failed to do so. From there a taxi to Karuizawa station where I bought my Shinkansen train ticket to Tokyo.

I told the lady at the ticket office that I wanted to go to Hamamatsucho station in Tokyo, but she then gave me a ticket for the town Hamamatsu. In Tokyo, I found this a bit strange and asked several of the other passengers if Hamamatsu was the same as Hamamatsucho and at least 3 of them said yes. With this local expertise, I jumped on a Shinkansen train to Hamamatsu but when they announced that it would take 1,5 hour to reach Hamamatsu I knew I was on the wrong train. I jumped off the train two stations after Tokyo and returned to Tokyo station where I explained what happened in the ticket office and got my money back. I then purchased a train ticket to Hamamatsucho (JPY150) which is best reached along the Yamanote line (circular line) and takes only 7 minutes from Tokyo station. At Hamamatsucho, I took the north exit and turned immediately right outside the building. Then followed the streets just straight and about 7 minutes later I was at Takebashi-Shimbashi ferry terminal. My boat to Hachio-Jima was to leave at 22:30 and would reach the island at 09:20 next morning. I paid the cheapest ticket possible JPY6800 for a sleeping place on the floor in a dormitory room. Rented a blanket to keep myself warm during the night. I had preordered tickets via my agent in the UK (the website is entirely in Japanese) but the boat was not nearly

close to capacity (should think Sunday night would be one of the more busier departures) so buying a ticket on the spot is probably no problem.

### **25.jan, Hachio Jima ferry**

Started the day at 07:00 finding myself standing on the aft of the boat. Realizing I was sailing under Norwegian flag was a nice surprise and I was happy to see that my nation's seafarer reputation is still alive! The boat is rather big and has a lot places to stay outside. Thus, finding a place sheltered for the wind is not a problem. Gale force wind and 2 m waves was barely noticeable on the boat. About 5 Laysan albatrosses later we docked in Hachio-Jima at 09:20. Meaning I had 40 minutes on the island to search for Izu Thrush – an endemic found only on the Izu islands. Despite seeing a lot of birds in the nearby gardens, there was no thrush to be seen and I arrived onto the ferry 3 minutes before departure. The officer was pointing to his clock and apparently thought I was pushing my luck with time a bit too much....

Counting Hachio Jima as island number 1, the birding was rather slow until island nr.2. One pod of bottle nosed dolphins played along the bulb of the ship for a few minutes and a little bit later a group of Striped dolphins were seen next to the ship. Between island 2 and 3 I counted at least 7 Sperm whales and the the number of albatrosses picked up. A nice adult like Short-tailed albatross was sitting on the sea some hundred meters away from the ferry. My primary target for this trip was safe! This species was once considered the most common albatross species in the world. Heavy feather collecting industry brought the population to extinction. At least that's what we thought for 20 years when 10 birds was found on old nesting grounds in Torishima (one of the Izu islands). From then, things have gone upwards and the population is now counting about 1000 birds and is said to be increasing. Docking at island nr 3 there was at least 10 sea turtles in the bay next to the "harbour". Not sure which species. The time had now reached about 14:00 and about 20 minutes after departing this island the birding was really picking up. There were albatrosses everywhere, and as so many birds passed I had no chance to check them all with binoculars. About 1 hour and 1000 albatrosses (8 short-tailed and 5 black-footed), the albatross numbers started to drop as the shearwater numbers increased dramatically. Getting closer to Tokyo we, started to meet other boats. Large flocks of black hooded and black tailed gulls, and also quite a few alcids were seen in flight. Light was decreasing, and only 8 were positively identified to be rhinoceros auklets as they passed the boat closely. Two others were most certainly Crested auklet (all black underneath with no white in plumage) but light conditions unfortunately too poor to be certain. All in all, a very good birding day, and 3 new albatross species added to my life list which now counts 13 of the world's 18 albatrosses.... Birding was possible until 17:00, and we docked in Tokyo (Takebisha-Shanbashi) at 20:30. I then walked to Hamamatsucho and went onto the monorail to Haneda, then a limousine transfer bus (JPY3000) to Narita int.airport where I jumped on to the free hotel shuttlebus to Narita port hotel which was a 10 minutes bus ride away. Narita port hotel costs JPY3600 for a nice room and was well worth the money! Possible to eat dinner and breakfast in its restaurant, and the hotel also has a small shop for softdrinks and snacks.

### **26.jan, Tokyo - Norway**

Took the 08:30 shuttle bus to the Narita airport to be sure to be there in time for the 2 hr check in time required for international departures. No airport tax needed to be paid when checking out of the country. I was for the second time in my life huzzled over my overweight carry on luggage. Usually, they calm down when they see it's only camera gear, but this time I had to repack a little to reduce the weight. Still overweight by 3kg the lady let

me through. My Swiss air flight at 11:05 was 15 minutes late, and about 18 hours later I was back in Oslo, Norway ready for my final leg to my hometown Trondheim. Swiss air has the best airborne service of any airline in my mind. Always making sure you have soda/water and even giving ice cream and banana for snacks between the meals. A very nice trip had come to an end.











