

Hokkaido, Dec 05-08



Fellow Oxon-birder and great friend Tom Bedford had travelled to Japan in winter in 2006 and his rave reviews of the experience, especially his time on Hokkaido, meant I filed this as a must-visit destination. However unlike some other places, Japan was clearly one that would naturally present itself as a pre- or post-work opportunity at some point in my academic career. Finally in Dec 2014 that opportunity arose when I was asked to give a keynote talk at a conference in Tokyo. I arranged to fly in a few days early and took advantage of the cheap internal airfares available to foreign travellers – US\$100 each way from Tokyo Haneda – to spend 3 days in Hokkaido. Like another Oxonbirder (Steve Burch) also following in Tom’s footsteps, I used Tommy Onita (booking@japanbirdwatching.com) to help with on-ground logistics such as designing a suitable itinerary and bookings of accommodation (some of which have very limited English) and the boat trip I went on.

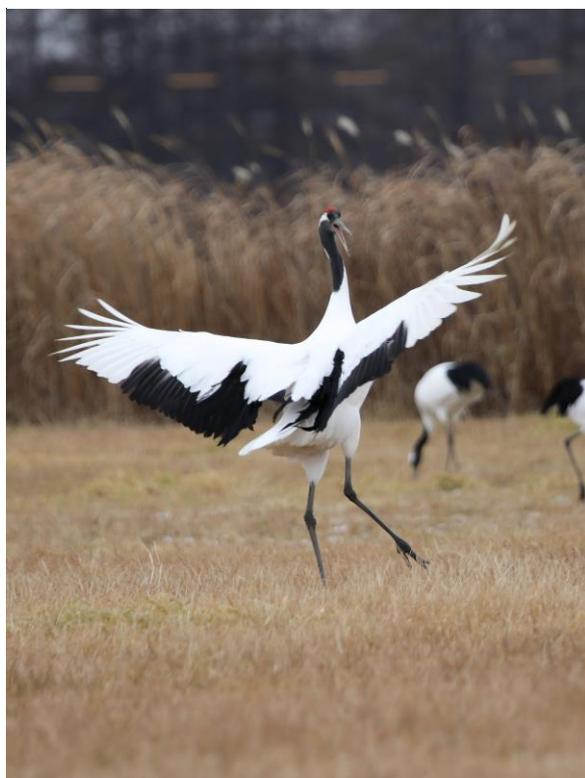
My flight from Adelaide to Tokyo Haneda via Singapore arrived very early in the morning and the transfer to the domestic part of the terminal for my flight with Air Do was painless. It was impossible to know if the pun in the name is intentional or not. As I waited for the flight I used the departure lounge “facilities”, having an amusing and rather titillating time with the various water jet controls on the heated toilet seat.

An hour or so later I disembarked at Kushiro Airport, met the hire car rep who drove me to their garage nearby, and was underway soon after 9.30 am, outside temperature around -5C. It was only about 45 minutes’ drive to Tsurui where a couple of navigation errors led to me finding a group of **Whooper Swans** and a **Black-eared Kite**, then even better, the first of the Hokkaido “big three”, a **Red-crowned Crane**. I stopped and had nice if distant views of a single bird near a barn before finding my way back to the correct route (where at the junction two more Cranes flew over). By around 11am I had found the crane centre in Tsurui and spent the next hour with two Japanese photographers taking pictures of more than 50 elegant and beautiful **Red-crowned Cranes**. Though it would have been even better with snow on the ground, it was still fantastic to see the birds at close range, not just feeding but raising their necks to call and even occasionally dancing.

At midday I drove east from the crane centre a few hundred metres along a track to find the Hickory Wind Wilderness Lodge bed and breakfast. This small pension is owned and run by Makato Ando, a motor-bike loving, guitar playing birder and professional photographer. My first encounter with him was a rather surreal one, in which he – in rather broken and heavily accented English – tried to explain to me that I was wrong to call my vehicle a “hire car” and the correct terminology was a

“rental car”. He also was adamant that I had asked for two nights’ accommodation in my email, even though I knew my booking (through Tommy Onita) was for one. I finally realised his when recalling the wording of my message and the significant role of the preposition on which the meaning hung: I had said “I will stay with you *in* two days”, not “*for* two days”. While we spoke a **Eurasian Nuthatch** and **Marsh Tit** visited a feeder in the yard by his front door.

The lodge itself proved to be clean and comfortable, but disappointingly westernised for my tastes – personally I would have preferred it to be more like a traditional ryokan. Nevertheless it was for one night only and I would be spending little time actually here in the lodge. As soon as I’d unpacked I drove back up the road to the supermarket to grab some lunch, and then back to renew my photography with cranes. By now the ranks of photographers had swelled, and a line of 25 or more spread out along the fence line that kept people out of the field where the cranes fed. As well as the cranes I noted a few other species, most notably **Dusky Thrush**. I tried hard to turn a confiding **Great-spotted Woodpecker** into something more exotic.







I had arranged to meet Ando-san after lunch to go in search of one particular target that I knew would need local knowledge. Driving back up the road that I'd erroneously travelled in the morning, then off onto a side track, within less than half an hour he had hit the jackpot, with a gorgeous **Ural Owl** sat quietly in an open hollow. After making sure I had a decent enough view in the scope Ando

suggested we move closer. I was somewhat disquieted when he showed me the small can of pepper-spray he carries in case of encountering a bear along the way!



After scrambling down a steep bank and picking our way across a partly frozen bog we arrived at a spot where the view was awesome and we both filled our boots with images, me trying every combination of SLR photography, digi-scoping, phone scoping, video, etc. The owl didn't do much, occasionally opening his eyes or turning his head, but it was still hard to drag ourselves away as the sun began to go down and temperature drop alarmingly. We tried one more spot for Ural Owl on the way back but this regular roost site was not occupied. We did add **Japanese Wagtail** and **White-tailed Sea Eagle** to the trip though.

We made it back to the lodge in time for Ando-san to recommend a spot for evening photography of the cranes going to roost. The temperature was dropping significantly as the sun got lower in the sky, so Ando-san lent me his ingenious camera gloves. In these mittens the

hand part folds back so that fingers sheathed in thin thermal material can access shutter and other important camera controls. I returned to the lodge after a lovely experience of the cranes flying over, but without any memorable images to show for my time. Ando-san cooked me a pleasant (if westernised) dinner and after a few beers I retired to my room.

6/12



I rose early to be at the famous Otowa Bridge for dawn. The temperature was a ball-clenching -12C and mist was rising from the river where 25+ cranes were roosting and feeding. There were maybe a dozen photographers here, all after a quintessential shot of the cranes on the river, golden from the rising sun. I did ok with my work, but could barely feel my fingers and retreated to the lodge for

breakfast. A brief stop at the crane centre on my way back added some more cranes, a **Great-spotted Woodpecker**, more **Dusky Thrush** and a **Great Tit**.



My main objective, post dawn photography, was to drive to Nemuro where I had a boat trip booked the following day. Although only 150km away, I wanted to bird a bit along the way, and the maximum speed limit on most of the route was only 50-60km/h, so it would take pretty-much all day. My route took me back over Otowa Bridge – where I spent some more time with the cranes – before at 10am heading off along minor road (243) to Lake Toro. Even now I got distracted again, deciding to detour the 100m or so off the main road to see if the **Ural Owl** was back at the same roost (he was!), and I also clocked **Brown-eared Bulbul** here.

The road rose up and then descended to marsh lands where I found another group of cranes. As I pulled the car to the side of the road to scope the cranes a huge bird flushed from the tree next to me and as I followed it out across the marsh I realised that it was a **White-tailed Sea Eagle**. Joined by another it circled for a minute or two then settled on a patch of ice at the edge of the reed-bed.

At Lake Toro I pulled into the car park and wandered along the edge of the mostly frozen lake for 30min or so. A group of **Whooper Swan** were very photogenic, but a flock of 60 **Bean Geese** (Tundra?) was very skittish and took off from a small bay, flushed by me before I even knew they were there. I also noted **Great-crested Grebe** and **Mallard** here, keeping the trip list ticking over. I carried on south past Lake Toro on the 221, bypassing Kushiro and joining the main south coast road.





Just beyond Akkeshi I noticed a large raptor above the road and then another much lower, looking like it might even be about to land on a hill just to the left of the road. Huge, dark with a massive bill, even a glimpse as I drove was enough to make me 90% certain these were my first of the fantastic **Stellar's Sea Eagle**. I searched for a place to stop and within 500m or so found a small farm track that I could pull onto and drive up about 200m to a locked gate. It appeared that from here it would only be a short walk up a hill to get a view back down to where I'd seen the birds. I jumped the fence and walked 150m across the field towards a ridge. Suddenly I saw more huge birds in flight, and then as I crested the ridge I realised there were at least 20 **Stellar's** of various ages here. Most were young birds with all dark wings and white tail edged black. Some were beginning to acquire significant orange on the bill. Many had been on a carcass lower down the slope and near-adult lingered with about 30 **Large-billed Crows**. Some of those in flight cruised by to check me out, and from close range and I stared into the eyes of one majestic adult.

Back on the road I diverted at one point to check out a small group of **Scaup** on a stream until I arrived at Lake Furen. A Little Grebe added to the list, but a close pair of Red-crowned Cranes at the tip of the lake was the best moment of the afternoon. From 13:00 for 15:00 I walked along the icy, slippery, rickety boardwalk at the north-eastern corner of the lake to an area of dead trees and forest. Whooper Swans were numerous on the lake itself, but I saw little of note: **Tree Sparrow**, **Coal Tit**, **Marsh Tit** and **Eurasian Nuthatch**. On the sea as I returned to the car I found 10 **Goldeneye**, including a couple of very smart males. A single **Black Scoter** was great to see after I'd dipped on one in North Wales many years ago, but I hoped for better views over the coming days. Various gulls were hanging around the causeway including **Black-headed Gull**, and then an interesting trifecta: **Glaucous-winged Gull**, **Slaty-backed Gull** and **Glaucous Gull**, nicely lined up to allow good comparisons.





At a small fishing harbour just outside Nemuro there were more gulls, and as the sun sank over Lake Onneto a **Black-eared Kite**, then a magnificent **Stellar's Sea Eagle** drifted over, a fitting end to another cracking day. It was only about 15 more minutes to Nemuro where I settled into the East Harbour Hotel, too western for my tastes, but adequate.

7/12



On the recommendation of Steve Burch and Tommy Onita I was booked onto a boat cruise from Ochiishi Harbour around Yururi and Moyaruri Islands. Originally I was the only one booked on the trip, but by the time I'd arrived in Hokkaido Tommy had emailed to say there was another punter, and when I arrived at the harbour I was greeted with the news that there was also a third person, meaning that the min threshold had been reached and I would not have to pay extra to ensure the trip went ahead. Koji Niiya, the leader on the trip spoke good English and was an entertaining and knowledgeable guide. Before we'd left the harbour I had seen more **Slaty-backed Gulls** and one of the best birds of the trip, about 20 cracking **Long-tailed Ducks**. I'd only ever seen a drab female on one of the Stanton Harcourt gravel pits many year ago, so to see several cracking males of this, one of the smartest of all ducks, was brilliant. For the next three hours we cruised out into the bay and around the islands and back. The worst part of the trip was that at times it was so cold my fingers

were in intense pain and I could barely focus my bins, let alone operate my camera. I tried to balance scanning for birds with my bins and keeping my hands thrust deep in my pockets in my inadequate gloves, holding the hand-warmers I'd bought from Ando-san two days earlier.

Though I don't recall great numbers of birds, by the end we had accumulated an impressive list and scored almost of the possible target species. Pride of place went to the auks: **Common Guillemot**, **Pigeon Guillemot**, **Spectacled Guillemot**, a few lovely **Ancient Murrelet** and a cracking (albeit winter plumage) **Rhinoceros Auklet** (a single bird seen late on as we returned to harbour). The latter three were lifers and my top targets for the trip. But there was a great supporting cast also: three cormorant species, **Temminck's**, **Pelagic** and **Red-faced**; three species of sea duck, **Long-tailed Duck**, **Harlequin**, **Black Scoter** (I decided not to count a possible White-winged (Velvet) Scoter); also a **Red-necked Grebe** (I'd only seen one before, on Caversham Lake near Reading), **Red-breasted Merganser**; and a few **Stellar's Sea Eagle** soaring over the islands.

I'd seen Pelagic Cormorant in California in 2010, but the other two species were lifers. They are not easy to identify and it was Niiya-san who picked them out initially, pointing first to a Temmick's in flight where we noted its diagnostic pale neck, while the Red-faced not in breeding plumage lacks its eponymous feature and the dark tip to the pale bill turned out to be the easiest feature to see in the field.



After the boat trip I drove north to the Notsuke Peninsula, on roads that hug the coast for over two hours. By the time I arrived I had only a couple of hours of daylight left. I noted a few **Glaucous Gull** and **Black Scoter** as I drove along the peninsula which sticks into the Sea of Okotsh like a skeleton's arm with its ghostly hand and fingers hand curled back on themselves. I picked up a permit and some chocolate at the visitors centre then resumed my drive. Immediately **Stellar's Sea Eagles** were

prominent, including a group of several roosting on the edge of a part-frozen lake alongside about 30 **Whooper Swans**.



My main target here was a small pink and brown finch, most likely at the very end of the peninsula. I parked and began the walk of one or two km to the end, scrunching along the pebbles and transporting me back to Blakeny Point in North Norfolk. At one point as I trudged along, maybe halfway to the point, a flock of 80 or more **Snow Buntings** swept past me and I fired off as many pics as I could in the hope of jaggng an Asian Rosy-finch amongst them. I decided to carry on since I would surely pass these birds again on my return. On reaching the end of the peninsula I realised that the flock had been flushed by a lone photographer, and there were virtually no birds left on this wind-swept and sea-battered, inhospitable spit of land.

It started to rain a little, the strong wind sweeping drops into my face and then even some sleet came so I started back to the car. But about 1/3 of the way back the flock of buntings zoomed back past me. Should I follow them? I was torn, but decided to give to 30min more—a Rosy-finch now would give me a clean-up of all my targets so far. I turned and trudged back to where the buntings had gone to ground, but they had mysteriously vanished without trace. Exploring the rest of the spit again, a flock of **Brent Geese** was my only reward until the light started to fail and the weather deteriorated further. I started to worry that I had left insufficient time to get to Rausu for a date with the last of the “big three” so I hurried back to the car.

Looking back to the south-west, the sleet was turning to snow, with the sunset refracting through distant snow-clouds rendering the sky amazing mauve and gold colours. I stopped to take photos of **Stellar’s Sea Eagles**, **White-tailed Eagles** and **Whooper Swans**, tracking across the horizon with that incredible backdrop. It was not comfortable, but the amazing conditions had created photographers’ paradise. If only I were more skilled to take full advantage!



From 4pm I drove as rapidly as I dared given the conservative speed limit, the dark and the snow. By the time I arrived at the famous Washi no Yado ryokan it was nearly 6pm and had been completely dark for some time. Several inches of snow had fallen. I introduced myself to the two ladies who run the place and through various pointing and other gestures I established that I was not too late, and that I could have some dinner then observe from the comfort of the dining room. Though it was set for about 15-16, and I fully expected a tour party to arrive any minute, none did. I was the only guest and had the viewing windows of the dining-room-come-hide completely to myself.

At about 7pm one of the women donned waders and wandered out into the middle of the stream with a bucket full of fish. I kept all of my various optics trained on the area. Under the high frequency LED lighting that illuminated the stream the falling snow strobed and danced as it drifted past the light. Suddenly, at 7.30 a huge shape appeared from the shadows and an adult **Blakiston's Fish Owl** settled on the edge of the snow covered rocks around a pool in the middle of the stream. It shuffled around on the edge then dropped into the pool where it grabbed a fish and downed it whole. It repeated the process a couple of times, and then, within two minutes it was gone again. Brief, but utterly fantastic. Huge, rare, enigmatic, living in barely hospitable but stunning scenery – they don't come much better.

I celebrated with a beer and then waited. And waited some more. An hour later, I heard muttering in Japanese behind me, and one of the old biddies excitedly gestured that it was back. Peering into the darkness behind the illuminated area could now make out the shape of the owl on a branch

overhanging the stream, as it peered down into the pool hoping for fish. Somehow the old lady conveyed to me that this was a different bird – the juvenile – though it was every bit as big as its parent. Eventually, as the adult had done earlier, it flapped down to the snow covered rocks. He was in less of a hurry and I now had extended views of the stonking mammoth owl with piercing yellow eyes. What a bird!



At around 9.30 it too took off and I decided to make my way through the snow to my room, where I set out my tatami mat and enjoyed a surprisingly comfortable sleep.

8/12

It had stopped snowing when I rose at 7am, but the world was completely white and pristine. I



peered from my window down to where the awesome owls had been the previous evening and realised there was a Brown Dipper in the stream. I spent some time observing and photograph this and two others that were present, then grabbed some breakfast and was

on my way.

As I drove through towns the locals were out in force clearing what I guess was the first big snow of the year. Along the coast the birding was excellent with numerous **White-tailed Eagles** and several **Stellar's Sea Eagles** in roadside trees and along the clear streams that flow down into the sea here.

I drove back onto the Notsuke Peninsula, my objective to try to find the Rosy-finch that had eluded me the previous evening. I didn't succeed, but the blue sky and new snow turned this into an excellent (though abbreviated) morning for



photography, with gulls and eagles galore, including **Slaty-backed** and **Glaucous**. Lots of **Black Scoter** bobbed about on the rough (northern) side of the peninsula.



I felt privileged to get views of the two species of **Sea Eagle** roosting on ice and snow, scenes more typical of January and which I had expected to miss being so early in the season. It took me longer than expected to get to the far end of the peninsula because I stopped so much for pics, but once there I walked as quickly as I could to the end of the spit. Sadly the only birds of note out here were more **Brent Geese**, and a lone **Red-breasted Merganser**, with not even last night's bunting flock present.



My flight was from Nakashibetsu, about an hour's drive away. I set off uncharacteristically conservatively at midday (for a 14:25 flight) and found myself approaching the airport with plenty of time to spare. Instead of waiting in the terminal, I diverted to Midorigaki Park (recommended by Koji Niiya as a decent place for a walk if I had time) and wandered around this urban woodland park, noting: **Marsh Tit**, **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, **Great Tit**, **Brown-eared Bulbul**, and lifer **Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker**.

It had been a fantastic and memorable few days, realising a long-standing ambition to visit this amazing place, full of quality birds – and a fitting way to break in the new 7D mark II. After delivering

my keynote in Tokyo, the icing on the cake was email from my student Carl who had also presented at the conference, informing we had won Best Paper.



