



# JAPAN WORLD CLASS WINTER BIRDS PHOTOGRAPHY TOUR

- with optional snow monkey extension



With Morten Jørgensen & Michael Westerbjerg Andersen

**Feb 15-25 (extension to Feb 28), 2024**



# ***DAY to DAY program in brief***

*(for full program see pp. 11-18)*

All transportation and all accommodation included.

Day 1: Dinner included.

Days 2-10 & 12-13: Breakfast & dinner included.

Days 11 & 14: Breakfast included (& dinner day 11 for extension participants).

## **MAIN TOUR**

- February 15 - Day 1: Tokyo -> Kagoshima -> Izumi. The first cranes.
- February 16 & 17:  
Days 2 and 3: The Hooded & White-naped Cranes of Izumi.  
Plus wildfowl, raptors and more.
- February 18 - Day 4: Izumi -> Kagoshima -> Tokyo -> Kushiro.
- February 19 - Day 5: The iconic Red-crowned Cranes in Hokkaido's winter wonderland near Tsurui.
- February 20 - Day 6: Kushiro -> Tsurui -> Akan-Mashu National Park.  
Winter scenery, volcanoes, woodlands.
- February 21 - Day 7: Whooper Swan photography at steamy springs on the shores of frozen lakes.
- February 22 - Day 8: Akan-Mashu National Park -> Rausu. Rural and Coastal scenery.
- February 23 & 24:  
Days 9 & 10: Rausu eagles, owls, wildfowl, and more.  
Boat trips & coastal drives.
- February 25 - Day 11: Rausu -> Kushiro -> Tokyo. Main tour concludes.

## **EXTENSION**

- February 26 - Day 12: Tokyo -> Jigokudani.  
Japanese Macaques, the 'Snow monkeys' .
- February 27 - Day 13: Jigokudani - all day monkey business.
- February 28 - Day 14: Jigokudani -> Tokyo. Extension concludes.

## **Welcome to Japan's winter birds!**

*Japan's winter birds would be a highlight in the life of any ornithologist, and the photographic opportunities they offer are a gift to any wildlife photographer. Whether you are an aspiring amateur or a full-on professional, the spectacles you will witness will challenge and reward you.*

*One could easily spend a week at each of a variety of wondrous locations. To maximize the chances for you to see a great diversity of species and scenes within the time limits of a modern-day traveler, we have tailored a program with 2-3 nights at each of the four absolute top Japan winter bird locations (leaving you to decide if you wish to visit the Honshu 'snow monkeys' as an add-on).*

*We believe that by focusing on fewer locations, with longer stays at each, plus by allotting two guides and vehicles to such small groups, we can better facilitate you getting into the subject matters and finding inspiration to create your very own unique images. Also, this way, there is much less time and effort spent traveling, packing, unpacking, etc.*



*Please note that we, Michael and Morten, are your tour organizers and providers, your location and bird ID guides, and your drivers, but we are not photo instructors.*

## Photo highlights and focus events:

1.000's of White-naped and Hooded Cranes, 100's of Red-crowned (Japanese) Cranes, scores to 100's of Whooper Swans, scores to 100's of Steller's Sea-Eagles and White-tailed Sea Eagles, and Blakiston's Fish-Owl.



## Additional noteworthy species potentially offering photo opportunities:

Up to ca. 18 species of duck in their finest plumages including superb specialties such as Mandarin, Falcated, Eastern Spot-billed, Baikal Teal, Harlequin, Siberian and Black Scoters and Long-tailed Duck; 3 species of heron/egret; Eurasian and Black-faced Spoonbills; Osprey, Black-eared Kite and Eastern Buzzard; a further 3 species of crane (rare but annual - Siberian, Common and Sandhill); Northern Lapwing, Long-billed Plover, Solitary Snipe; a great variety of gulls including Saunder's, Black-tailed, Kamchatka, Vega, Slaty-backed, Glaucous-winged and Glaucous; Oriental Turtle-Dove; Ural Owl; Common and Crested Kingfisher; 3 species of woodpecker (Japanese Pygmy, White-backed, Great Spotted) with another 2 possible (Black and Japanese Green); Bull-headed Shrike; Daurian Jackdaw, Eastern Rook, Jungle Crow; Bohemian and Japanese Waxwings; 7 species of 'tit' including Varied, Japanese and Chinese Penduline; Brown-eared Bulbul; Japanese Bush Warbler; Japanese White-eye; White-cheeked Starling; 3 species of thrush; Daurian Redstart; Brown Dipper; Russet and Eurasian Tree Sparrows; 3 species of wagtail; Buff-bellied Pipit; Oriental Greenfinch; 5 species of bunting (Meadow, Chestnut-eared, Rustic, Elegant, Masked) with another 3 possible.





Other highlights:

Drives through the forested rural southern Kyushu. A variety of winter sceneries of central and eastern Hokkaido (mountains, volcanoes, lakes, forests, farmlands, coastal roads, fishing harbors, etc.). Japanese cuisine and Onsen (public thermal baths). Japanese efficiency, hospitality, and courtesy. The friendly and personal guiding services of Mik and Mojo.



### Extension highlights:

100+ wild Japanese Macaque's up close, with all their antics on display – bathing, playing, mating, fighting, feeding, etc.; drives through central Honshu from coastal Tokyo to mountainous Jigokudani, a stay at a historical and very traditional Japanese Onsen right next to the monkeys.



### Group size:

4-8 guests plus your 2 tour leaders Michael Westerbjerg Andersen & Morten Jørgensen. The tour will go ahead with 4 or more guests.

### Activity/difficulty level:

Physical requirements include being willing and able to get up early and enduring cold conditions. Apart from that easy to moderate. Generally walking will be limited, and the days are not too long (ca 12 hours of daylight in the south, 10 hours in the north). We do however expect to be out all day most days. See below for further details.



## Transportation:

Domestic flights between Tokyo, Kyushu, and Hokkaido. Two comfortable vehicles from airports to accommodation, and every day from accommodation and into the adventure and back again. There will be ample space for everyone to have a window seat in the vehicles as well as for our luggage.



## Accommodation:



A variety of accommodation types have been chosen for a variety of reasons. Proximity to the main action – the wildlife and the photography scenes – has been priority. Location, location, location. Being close to the subject, there is less time spent in transit, at other times more freedom gained for each of you to decide what you want to do and when.

The opportunity for the cultural experience of a traditional Japanese homestay or a classy Onsen (thermal spring public bath 'hotel') has also been taken into consideration.

We will also have a few nights in a modern 'western-style' 3-star hotel.

See below for further details.

Generally, we will book twin doubles, but single accommodation is possible against a fee (Solo Rate) (see below for details). If you are a single traveler and are ok to share, we will attempt to pair you with a same-sex co-traveler. If that is not possible, the single supplement fee (Solo Rat) will apply (see also Terms & Conditions (T&C)).

## Climate:

Somewhat springy (Kyushu) and very wintery (Hokkaido). There is a good chance that we will not have much rain. But we may have much snow. Although high pressures are common, with blue skies and low winds, we may also experience the passage of low-pressure systems with cold winds and more precipitation. The weather may ultimately alter our program (see also T&C).

In Kyushu, the temperatures will probably not drop below freezing, or only at night if they do. Daytime expected temperatures +5-15C (40-60F). In Hokkaido, expect daytime temperatures between -10 and +5 C (15-40F).

## Culture (customs, language, food, etc.):

Japanese culture is intricate; sophisticated and simple, ancient and modern, tradition-bound and flexible. We will mostly be focused on wildlife and wilderness, but we will meet the people and their ways as well. The Japanese do not expect foreigners to be able to fully understand or follow their customs, but a few are important to know about.

In general, it is considered polite to be gentle, quiet, yielding, unobtrusive. We will appreciate this often as we meet it, but don't forget that the locals will appreciate it from us as well.

Most Japanese speak little to no English. Most foreigners speak no Japanese. Learning a few of the most common words and phrases will be highly appreciated. Sign language and the generally very friendly and helpful attitude will do the rest.

Depending on where we are, there will be expectations of shoes off, slippers on, different slippers for bathroom visits, etc. Please show consideration and follow the instructions. We will help you to do the right thing.

Your breakfasts and dinners are included in the tour (see below for details). On most occasions, these meals will be Japanese style. Japanese food is many things. At some locations, there will not be much of a choice (set menus). Expect to sample a lot of tastes, many kinds of seafoods, various soups, pickled vegetables, etc. The staple is generally white rice. There is usually no vegetarian option. You will return home, a very delightful cuisine experience richer.



Whereas breakfast and dinner are included, we have decided that lunches are best enjoyed 'on the fly'. The days are relatively short, and we wish to give you opportunity to maximize the time spent outdoors and behind the camera. If we were to include lunch daily, we would have to leave the birds and head somewhere else, wait for the food to be served, and consumed, and then later drive back out again. Instead, we suggest that lunch can be a 'snack' type meal, which we will let you select and purchase by yourselves at one of the local kiosk-type stores (think 7/11 or similar). Grab a bottled drink or two, a couple of sandwiches, some prefab sushi, or a few tasty rice-balls, and bring it with you in the cars to enjoy in the field.



At several of our locations, there will be the option of the use of an 'Onsen'. These are the world-famous traditional Japanese public thermally heated warm baths. A string of guidelines applies (and slightly varying from one Onsen to the next). We can discuss that further at the time. Do pack bathing suits/trunks for the outdoor/shared ones.

The fully automated and heated-seats toilets of Japan are also world famous. Don't miss out on the experience of the 'posterior spray'!

Tipping is not customary.

Japan is currently (early 2023) still wearing masks in most situations. The expectation is that we wear masks when moving about indoors (i.e., shops, hotel lobbies, etc.), on public transportation, on domestic flights, etc. Although most Japanese also wear masks outdoors, this is not a requirement. As this might change, we will inform further closer to the time. Masks are readily available in most shops.



### Other logistics (currency, paying, internet, phones, electricity, etc.):

Lunches, snacks, alcohol, etc. are not included in the tour, so you will be spending a bit of pocket money. Practically everywhere, you will be able to pay with major credit cards. But it can be useful to have some Yen cash, particularly when we are seemingly far from everything, yet find ourselves faced with a vending machine with warm or cold drinks. Or when you've just had a drink with dinner and cash is simply faster and easier.

Internet is widely available, stable, and fast.

SIM cards can be purchased at the airport.

The power plug sockets are of the same kind as used in North America, i.e. different from the European ones. Regardless, an international travel adaptor is a good item to pack. The standard voltage in Japan is 100.

## Price:

We are pricing these tours according to the number of participants, based on an optimal group size of eight. This means that if we fill the tour(s), everyone will have to pay less. When you make your booking, we will charge you based on the price for 8 participants. Some 3+ months prior to the tour commencement date, we will inform you of the expected final tour cost and offer you the opportunity to decide freely whether you want to maintain your booking or receive a full refund.

### **MAIN TOUR**

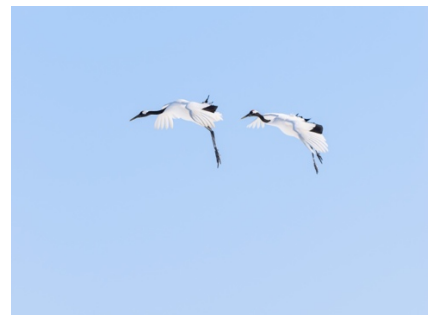
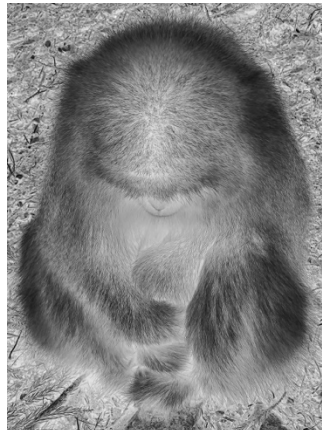
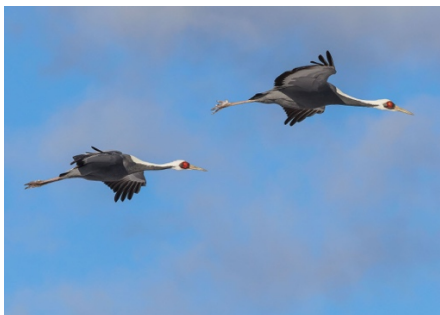
@ 8 participants: US\$ 6,250.-  
Solo Rate supplement: US\$ 800.-

### **EXTENSION:**

@ 8 participants: US\$ 700.-  
Solo Rate supplement: US\$ 250.-

## Payment Schedule:

Please pay a 20% deposit (US\$ 1,250.-) per person when booking.  
Please pay a further 40% (US\$ 2,500.-) per person 6 months prior to tour.  
Please pay the balance 3 months prior to tour.



## Tour Price Includes:

- Domestic flights (4) and domestic flight taxes
- Accommodation (10 nights) based on double occupancy
- Breakfasts and dinners as per program
- Driving and guiding by Mik and Mojo
- Activities as per program, including:
  - Vehicle usage throughout
  - Up to three boat trips in Rausu
  - Up to one owl visit at Rausu
- Local entrance fees, permits, and similar
- Pre-departure information and post-tour report

## Tour Price does NOT Include:

- Any pre-tour or post-tour expenses (flights, hotels, transfers, airport taxes, visas, and similar)
- Mandatory travel- and health insurances (see T&C for details)
- Lunches, snacks, alcoholic and other drinks
- Items of a personal nature (souvenirs, laundry, snacks, additional activities, etc.)
- Unexpected major cost increases (see T&C for details)
- Any costs not specifically mentioned above under 'Tour Price Includes'.

## **MAIN TOUR day-to-day details:**

Please note that any of the below details may change. We will strive to deliver the program described here, but circumstance beyond our control may force us to change the order or events, to change accommodation, to cancel a boat trip, or similar.

Day 1: Dinner included.

Days 2-10 & 12-13: Breakfast & dinner included.

Days 11 & 14: Breakfast included (& dinner day 11 for extension participants).

Day 1: Tokyo – Kagoshima - Izumi.

We shall meet in the morning, in Haneda airport in Tokyo, for our first domestic flight, to Kagoshima. Please note that we will generally use Haneda airport as our transit and transfer place between the various parts of our tour, so you may be well advised to buy your international flights in to and out of Haneda. You are also strongly encouraged to arrive in Japan at least one day/night early.

After the <2 hours flight to Kagoshima, we shall pick up our two hired vehicles and then drive the scenic road to Izumi. We expect to arrive in Izumi in time for us to have our first hours with the thousands of cranes. We shall then check in to our very Japanese homestay right there – among all the birds.





### Days 2 & 3: The Hooded & White-naped Cranes of Izumi.

Izumi town is nearby. We are outside it, in flat country, at the coast. In the background are low rounded hills. Much of the area is agricultural land, rice-paddies, and fields for a variety of vegetables. A few waterways crisscross the area.

Even before the sun has come above the horizon, you may well be birding and shooting. The cranes are right outside by the thousands, and the day begins with the sounds and sights of them waking up. Feeding takes place soon after, and the frenzy builds. Many other birds are flitting about as well, ducks, spoonbills, egrets, rooks, and kites. Much of this you will be able to see from the window of your rooms, or by simply stepping outside.

After our first traditional Japanese breakfast, we shall decide together how we will spend day two. With two vehicles and a small group, we shall be able to cover a variety of locations and scenes. While we will probably initially stay together, there is the option to split up and spend time shooting different species – or we may do so only on day 3. Apart from cranes, waterfowl, and raptors, some of you may like to spend some time looking for smaller birds, be they kingfishers, buntings, Japanese White-eyes, or perhaps even the all-white Siberian Crane.



Day 4: Izumi – Kagoshima – Tokyo - Kushiro.

Today, we drive back from Izumi to Kagoshima, deliver the cars, check our luggage through to Kushiro, and then fly twice: First to Tokyo, then after a short wait there, on to Hokkaido! In the afternoon, in Kushiro airport, we will pick up two new vehicles, and then transfer to a comfortable hotel downtown. In the evening, we shall discuss the options for tomorrow.

Day 5: Japanese cranes in Hokkaido's winter wonderland near Tsurui.

Whether you decided to be there from before sunrise or a bit later, your day will begin at the famous bridge, from where there are views down (and up) a frigid river, lined by frosted trees, with groups of Red-crowned Cranes dotting the waterway. While Sika Deer, Whooper Swans and the odd eagle may also be around, the main attraction is the cranes – at first scenically silhouetted against the rising sun, then flying off in little groups to their feeding areas.

When we leave the bridge, we only have a short drive to one of the places where the cranes congregate. Another place is also not far. We can visit both, and alternate between them, depending on the numbers and activity levels of the cranes. There is also a café nearby in case the weather requires the occasional warm up.

When we feel we have done well for the day, we will head back to the warm comfort of our hotel in Kushiro.



Day 6: Kushiro – Tsurui – Akan-Mashu National Park.

We can spend some more hours photographing the most iconic of the cranes of Japan, before leaving that group of birds behind. We may also this morning visit a Ural Owl.

In the afternoon, we shall drive inland for a couple of hours, toward the central parts of Hokkaido, admiring the winter landscapes along the way. Mountains and volcanos grow forth on the horizon, farmland and woods alternate. Before evening, we will be installed in the luxurious comfort of our 'Onsen'. Two nights we will spend here, and a full day-and-a-half of adventure awaits at the nearby lakesides and in the woods. Perhaps already this evening, you will be viewing and photographing Blakiston's Fish Owl.

#### Day 7: Whooper Swan photography at steamy springs on the shores of frozen lakes.

A full day of shooting near and at the scenic lakes Kussharo and Mashú of the Akan district, where the Whooper Swans congregating in the open water near the thermal springs attract photographers from all over the world. The backdrop is wonderful, the swans are graceful, and the scene is rife with opportunities. If you wish, you may also here change into swimwear and have a dip – right next to the swans!

Again, if there is the desire for it, we can split up, and one vehicle can take some people exploring. The area is good for many woodland species, such as 3-4 woodpecker species, Eurasian Jay, Eurasian Nuthatch, several species of tit, and more. In the evening, we are back in the warmth and comfort of our 'Onsen' hotel, with a second chance to see the very rare and very large fish owl.



#### Day 8: Akan-Mashu National Park – Rausu.

We can take you to the lakeside for sunrise, or you can sleep in and come out later. After a morning of swan and lake photography, it will be time to drive to our final major location of the tour: Rausu. This is a 3–5-hour drive, depending on how many photo stops we make (and depending on weather/snow/road conditions). Look out for Sika Deer and Red Fox.

Rausu is a bustling but sleepy fishing town, nestled between ocean and a steep mountain-range. What it does not have in top-modern facilities and conveniences, it more than compensates for in wildlife. This is where we will experience what for many is the ultimate winter bird highlight: A concentration of up to hundreds of two of the most majestic sea eagles. You will no doubt have seen a few dozen already, by the time we get checked in to our accommodation.

Days 9 & 10: Rausu eagles, owls, wildfowl, and more.

During our time in Rausu, we shall focus on photographing eagles. We have planned three boat trips, and we will also drive up and down the coastline in our cars. If we still need to get better views or shots of Blakiston's Fish Owl, we will prioritize that as well.



The locally breeding White-tailed Sea Eagles are quite numerous in Hokkaido year-round, and during the winter they are joined by more, as well as a large number of Steller's Sea Eagles. The latter breed farther north in the Sea of Okhotsk and Kamchatka areas, but many migrate south to their wintering areas which include Hokkaido. Both inland and along the shores, hundreds of these two eagle species are a unique spectacle of Hokkaido's between December and March. Many of them gather in or near the many fishing ports. We shall take advantage of this by chartering a boat to take us a bit away from the coast. Using locally caught fish as bait, the operator's lure the eagles (and many gulls) to get airborne and come to us. There is no guarantee for pack-ice, but there is guarantee for a spectacular eagle show. We shall be shooting from the boat's decks, capturing images of eagles soaring, maneuvering, diving, gliding in for a catch, sometimes also squabbling and fighting.



On day 9, we intend to have two boat trips, one morning and one afternoon, to maximize our chances to photograph enough eagles. On day 10, we have scheduled a third boat trip. Please note that while cold, calm, and sunny days are frequent, we may also have very cold and windy weather come through, perhaps with much snowfall. It is therefore not guaranteed that all these three boat trips will run, but by planning three, we have at least optimized our chances that at least one or two will. Ultimately, the boat owner's make the decisions, on the day(s).

Apart from the boat trips, we shall also look for birds along the coast, and in the harbors, using our vehicles as platforms and hides to photograph ducks and gulls, cormorants, Brown Dipper, and more. We may see more Sika Deer, Hokkaido Red Foxes in their beautiful winter coats, and maybe even sealions or seals.



Day 11: Rausu – Kushiro - Tokyo.

Our final day together will be a long day of travel. We have a long drive back to Kushiro and need to get an early start. If the weather and road conditions allow, we may have spare time along the way to stop for more photography, perhaps by the Ural Owl if we didn't get it the first time around, or perhaps to get some final shots of Red-crowned Cranes.

After delivering the cars at Kushiro, we shall fly to Haneda airport in Tokyo, where the main tour ends.

If you have purchased the extension, your dinner and your overnight stay will be included.



## **EXTENSION day-to-day details:**

### Day 12: Tokyo - Jigokudani.

We shall get our vehicles packed early today, and head west for ca. 4 hours. Our drive will be through the vast expanses of Tokyo at first, then through more rural areas, until we approach the Honshu 'Alps'. Although the drive is quite scenic in parts, our main goal will be to get to our destination early enough to allow for us to have our first hours with the 'snow monkeys' already this afternoon.

From the carpark to our 'Onsen', and to the monkeys, is a 1.6 km (one mile) walk on a forest trail. You will not have to carry your luggage yourselves, but you will have to walk the trail. This trail is never steep, but it is almost invariably slippery.

The Japanese Macaque is the world's northernmost occurring primate (apart from one other) and is endemic to Japan. It would not necessarily be so approachable and photogenic if it wasn't for the local troops' addiction to the hot springs of Jigokudani. This has become a world-wide attraction, and although it can get quite crowded and feel a bit 'zoo-like', the personalities and antics of these wild monkeys are totally worth the visit.



We shall stay with them right until four pm, when the area is closed for the night (for humans). Our accommodation, however, is right there. We intend to lodge for two nights at one of the most scenically located and scenically built 'onsens' you could imagine. Not only is this another cultural highlight of the tour in and of itself, but it also means that we shall – just like at the beginning of the main tour – be staying right in the middle of the wildlife spectacle. There is a real possibility that if you wake up and look out your window in the night, a monkey might be looking in at you.

Day 13: Jigokudani – all day monkey business.

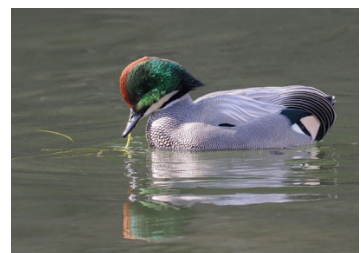
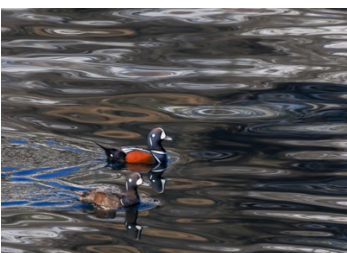


We are right there. From 9 am until 4 pm, you may roam among the monkeys. You should be able to shoot quite freely at first, before the crowds arrive, and even after they do, there is space enough for you to find your own little groups of primates, your own backgrounds, your own unique angles, and scenes. We may also see the endemic Japanese Serow, or perhaps the confiding Alpine Accentor.

In the evening, we shall have our last supper together, a final traditional Japanese meal.

Day 14: Jigokudani - Tokyo.

Today, we must be sure to be back at the airport in time for the first flights out. Depending on the scheduling, we may before departure from the mountain area be able to spend a few hours with the monkeys, or we may leave early and schedule a stop along the way back to Tokyo. Once we arrive to Haneda, the tour extension ends.



JAPAN WORLD CLASS WINTER BIRDS PHOTOGRAPHY TOUR

- with optional snow monkey extension
- **Feb 15-25 (extension to Feb 28), 2024**



With Morten Jørgensen & Michael Westerbjerg Andersen

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