

## JAPAN 4-21 FEBRUARY 2014

I am planning on writing about birds in this report. There will be some bird pictures, and I am even planning on using the word pishing in an incomplete, poorly punctuated, or possible run on sentence, so be ready for it. Japan has always been one of those countries that was in the back of my mind that I needed to visit. I had transited through Narita airport on multiple occasions on my travels through Asia and each time nagged myself about stepping off the plane at some point. Of course the promise of onsen loving Japanese macaques was the huge draw for me. Coke Smith's Hokkaido report with Japanese martens at the Yoroushi Daichi Hot Springs Lodge, was what finally sealed the deal for me. I had seen and researched Zegrahm Expeditions (a company based out of Washington state) "Snow Monkeys and Cranes of Japan" trip that included treks through Kyushu, Honshu and Hokkaido with multiple stops at wildlife hot spots, as well as a couple cultural sites thrown in for good measure. Knowing that traveling on my own would be difficult logistic wise for me in Japan, I signed up for the tour with my friend Colleen from California.

Day 1-2 – Snow fall along the east coast canceled my original flight from Virginia to Newark, so I was re-routed through Chicago onwards towards Tokyo.

Day 3 – My friend and I had decided to go into Tokyo a day early. We opted to visit the Ueno Zoo which turned out to be a nice way to kill a few hours. They had the typical zoo subjects, as well as a nice assortment of Japanese specialties including Japanese badgers, Japanese giant flying squirrels, Ryukyu flying foxes (now a bat I must see in the wild ), raccoon dogs, Hokkaido brown bears, Japanese Asiatic black bears and Japanese giant salamanders to name a few. They also had an impressive Madagascar exhibit that had no less than 8 aye-ayes when I was there.



That night we were introduced to our guide for the trip Mark Brazil, as well as our travel companions for the rest of the trip. Mark is originally from the UK, but currently lives in Hokkaido. He leads wildlife trips around Japan (as well as other places in far east Russia and the Indian subcontinent) and writes a column called Wild Watch Japan. He calls himself a birder, but does have a wealth of knowledge about the mammals in Japan and where to see them.

Day 4 – Morning flight to Kyushu Island and we headed towards the Kirishima-Yaku National Park. Our first stop was the Kirishima Shinto shrine where we stopped for some photo ops. We then checked into our hotel the Kirishima Iwasaki Hotel in the heart of the park. From there we headed towards Lake Miike for a short hike to look at waterfowl. After about 5 minutes from leaving the hotel, I got my first look at the Kyushu subspecies of the Japanese (sika) deer, a mother with a fawn on the side of the road. Unfortunately they were not in a spot to pull over for pictures. Mark had told me he had often seen Eurasian wild boar along the paths towards the lake, however we did not see any that day, but there was a lot of evidence and places they had dug up. It was at the lake that while looking up at a tree, Mark started making a swishing type noise at a group of small birds. They seemed to enjoy it and came closer. Mark then told us he was “pishing”, this being the first time I have gotten to hear the avian equivalent of a mammal squeak used out in the field, I was very amused. There would be a lot of pishing to small birds going on during the rest of the trip. By the side of the lake there were also what looked like some vole excavations.

Day 5- Mark offered an early morning hike from the hotel through a small portion of the National Park. Myself, and a single traveler from California named Vicki, were the only ones that took him up on it (this sort of became the norm). We hiked for about an hour going uphill away from the hotel (take a right at the entrance) along the main road. There are multiple ravines along the sides of the roads, and along the first one about 10-15 minutes from the hotel there was a small bachelor group of Japanese deer. However, as soon as they saw us, they ran further down the ravine. We saw a second group of about 5 deer (3 adult females with two fawns) by an abandoned gutted building right by the hotel on the way back. Mark started making a “sika whistle noise” at them which he stated was the noise the males make. The female deer seemed very impressed by the noise and had a “deer in the headlight/I love you Mark” look at us. Once the whistling stopped however, so did the love, and the possibility of me getting any good pictures. At this point I only had some deer shaped object photos that I won't share. We met up with the rest of the group and then started our journey to Akune. Just after we left the hotel, there was group of



cars pulled off on the side of the road taking photos of a small group of Japanese deer. Luckily, our bus was able to turn around and position ourselves in front of the small herd without spooking them. Mark's sika love whistles also helped with getting them to stare at us for some good photos.



Our next stop was the Arasaki Crane Reserve in Izumi. The reserve is the site of a large (at times 12,000+) winter gathering of hooded and white-naped cranes. While we were there, there were also a few common and sandhill cranes present as well as a few hooded-white-naped crosses. I have seen large gatherings of sandhills in the US before, however this just seemed more impressive. The actual reserve has a small visitor center where they feed the cranes grain as well as frozen fish blocks that they can peck at during the afternoon. Black eared kites were also out in force to try to grab any fish from an unsuspecting crane. There are a couple spots around the reserve where grain is put out that we drove by, as well as some of the farmers fields that individual cranes were present in.







At night we went back to the visitor center to watch vast numbers of cranes come in to roost for the night. From there we went to our hotel the Hotel Grandview Akune and I got my first taste of sleeping on the floor, on a tatami matt, with a buckwheat pillow...

Day 6 – we woke up early to watch the cranes leave the roost site and be fed for the morning. From there we had our next cultural adventure and went to Izumi City to the Fumoto samurai city residences to tour a house where a samurai had lived. After the culture, we went to a small grey heron rookery close to the visitor center, then back to watch cranes for the rest of the day. We also got to see a group of four black faced spoonbills which is actually one

of the top ten birds I wanted to see in the wild. When we went to watch the cranes close to roosting time, I noticed that a group of the cranes seemed really agitated by one of the fish blocks. Within a minute the cause of the agitation became clear, when a feral cat went to the block for an afternoon snack.





Day 7 – very early am flight to Honshu to drive towards the village of Shirakawa-go. The village is a Unesco world heritage site and has a type of architecture called Gassho-Zukuri where the houses resemble praying hands. A few times a year they do a lighting ceremony where the village is lit up for tourists. While it was beautiful, it attracted a vast number of tourists, something that I don't really enjoy to be around in a small space. Along the way to the village we drove by the Nagawado Dam. Right in front of the dam I got my first look at a wild Japanese macaque. Right after the dam, I got my first and only look at a group of about 8 Honshu subspecies of Japanese deer. That night we went to the Hotel Associa Takayama Resort Hotel to spend the night.

Day 8 – Mark offered another morning walk, and told me he often sees Japanese squirrels by a small shrine near the hotel. When you leave the hotel, take a right out of the entrance and walk about roughly  $\frac{1}{2}$  of a km. There is a small hill on the left that led up towards the shrine. If there was a sign it was in Japanese. There are trees along all sides of the shrine. I saw evidence of squirrels there (what looked liked fresh tracks in the snow), but no squirrels themselves. The rest of the morning consisted of driving into Takayama to go sake tasting (very enjoyable), miso tasting and do some shopping. The afternoon we went to the Matsumoto castle for even more culture, then left for our hotel the Kanbayashi Hotel Senjukaku that was about 1.6 km to Jigokudani where the onsen loving macaques were. I had originally thought we would be staying in the lodge right by the macaques, but after staying at Kanbayashi I am glad we did not. It was my favorite hotel of the trip hands down. It had the best food, the best service, and was set in a beautiful location. If only the macaques could discover the hotel onsens.....

Day 9 – our first visit to Jigokudani aka “the valley of hell”. From the hotel, about  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the way along the trail, Mark has seen Japanese squirrels. There is also an uphill path at the end of this section that leads towards a ski area that was made for the previous Olympics that is good squirrel habitat. I checked both paths on both days with Mark and only saw an abandoned nest. I did see large number of Japanese hare tracks by the path. Jigokudani was everything a primate lover could ask for. Laid back macaques eating, playing and occasionally sparing. The actual onsen itself that has been made famous by countless photos, is smaller than I thought it would be. The first day there was Japanese independence day so there was a pretty large crowd. At one point a group of tourists had positioned themselves in the prime spot

in front of the onsen and would not budge for over an hour. One of the younger macaques kept grabbing one of the photographers lenses and I secretly hoped that it would pull the camera into the onsen with it.





Mark put himself on serow duty at this point as this is a known area for them. I told him to come get me if he sees one, and literally 20 minutes after we got there I was looking at my first Japanese serow. Within another 20 minutes I was looking at my second serow, as it turned out it was a mother with a calf. Mark told me all the hills around the monkey site are good for serow, and he has even seen them on the hike in.



The monkeys were fed barley in the morning, and throughout the day rangers were throwing barley into the onsen to help tempt monkeys to take a plunge. While I was there, about 15-20 different monkeys went into the onsen. It is definitely someplace I would recommend any good mammal watcher to take the time to go to.

Day 10 – we went back to Jigokudani, watched monkeys all day, saw the serow pair again, and had to deal with less tourists. As the area is close to multiple ski resorts, it was also interesting in watching the various outfits that people were showing up to, to watch the wildlife. They definitely did not get the “do not wear bright colors”



when watching wildlife memo.

Day 11 – Early morning to drive to Tokyo to catch a flight to Kushiro in Hokkaido. Along the way we stopped in Suwa City to go to the Suwa lake to look at a large gathering of waterfowl including Bewick's swans, mandarins ducks, smew, tufted ducks, and northern pintails. We got to our next hotel, the Hotel Taito in Tsurui-mura late that night.

Day 12 – In the morning a group of early risers went to the Otowabashi bridge to watch Japanese red crowned cranes at an overnight roost site. As there were plans to go there for the next two mornings, I decided this morning I would sleep in. After breakfast the whole group went back to the bridge to watch cranes leave the roost. From there, we went to the Akan Crane Center which is one of the feeding sites for the cranes. I have seen people write on this web site birds being listed under “honorable mammals”. That is how I feel about this crane. I love them. I loved watching them trumpet, pirouette, and leap in the air all in the name of greeting and courting. I liked watching the younger birds try to imitate their parent's leaps only to fall flat all the time. I enjoyed watching the males grab small bits of ice and throw them up in the air while trying to catch them all for their unimpressed mates.

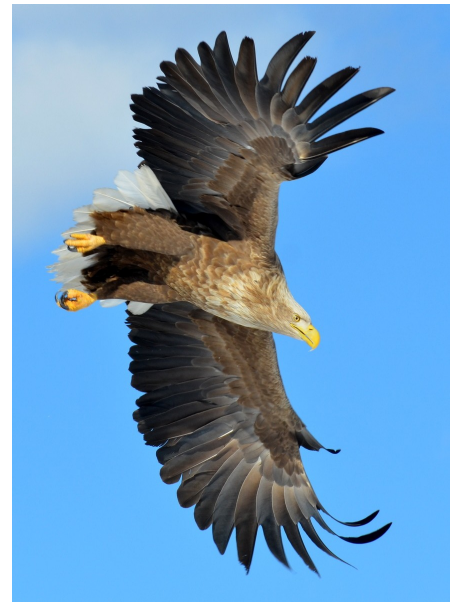






Basically the list could go on and on about how amazing I think they are. I liked the other cranes, but these ones just were so beautiful to watch, I never got bored.

Akan puts down grain in the morning for the cranes. This also attracts a large number of whooper swans. Around 2 pm however comes the real show, when they feed the cranes fish, live fish that is. I guess they tried to feed them dead fish in the past and the cranes were not having it. The live fish feeding also attracted a large number of white tailed fish eagles, black eared kites and two stellar sea eagles. Lets just say no fish survived the feeding.





A group of three of the Hokkaido subspecies of the red fox also were present just before the feeding frenzy, and one brave fox went in to try to catch a fish.



After this we drove to a second feeding site, the Tsurui Tancho Sanctuary to watch more cranes. Along the way I saw my first Hokkaido subspecies of Japanese deer, as well as three more foxes, including an actively mating pair. That evening we went to a field close to the Otowabashi bridge to watch the cranes come back to their overnight roost spot.

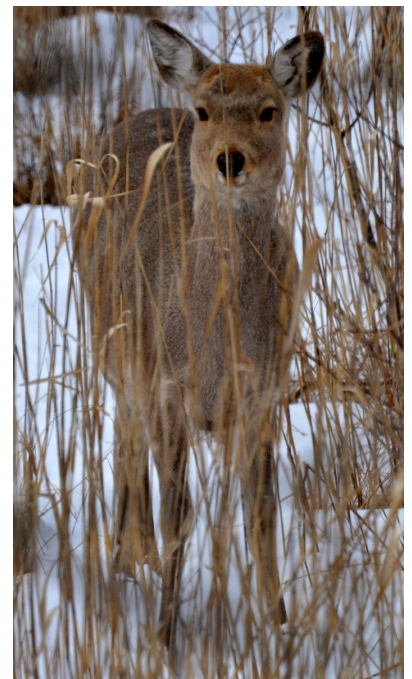
Day 13 – in the morning I went to the Otowabashi bridge to look at the cranes at their overnight roost site. It was cold, really cold and the cranes were pretty far away. After breakfast we went into the Kushiro Wetlands to look for deer. Just before the wetlands we stopped to take pictures of a group of Dosanko horses which





are one of the Japanese native horse breeds.

The wetlands did not disappoint and we saw multiple female deer, some with sub adult fawns.



Mark also new of a few spots in and by the wetlands to look for Ural owl. While we did not see any in the wetlands, I was finally looking at my first owl in Japan in a tree behind the new tax office in the village of Akan. We went back to the Akan Crane Center around 2 pm to watch the fish feeding again and saw a lone fox. In the evening we went to the Kushiro Museum. It had a nice selection of stuffed animals that are native to Hokkaido as well as a collection of Ainu (indigenous people that lived/live on Hokkaido) artifacts.



Day 14 – There was a good amount of snow on the ground when I got to Hokkaido, and overnight it started snowing again. A few brave souls went back to the bridge (not me) to look at the distant cranes one last time. After breakfast we started making our way towards Lake Kussharo which is famous for seeing whooper swans in various areas of the lake that are not iced over from all the hot springs. The snow started getting heavier throughout the morning, so we ended up at a small museum dedicated to a past sumo wrestler named Taiho who was from the area. I went from knowing nothing about sumo wrestling, to feeling pretty comfortable that I could engage in an educated conversation about the sport. I also oddly feel the need to see a live match. After lunch we drove to an area behind the Ainu museum that is closed



for the winter, to a small woodcarvers shop named Kotan. There are a small group of whooper swans in the lake behind the shop that he feeds once a day.



From there we went to our next lodge the Pension Papilio. This small hotel is located along Highway 52 about 3/4-1 km from the Sunayu area of Lake Kussharo that also has a group of swans that are fed around 5 pm. They used to let tourists feed the swans until concerns of bird flu stopped this. Mark, Vicki, and myself walked down to the area to watch the swans being fed that evening. At dinner Mark had told us that the weather forecast was calling for more snow.

Day 15 – One of the highlights of the Pension Papilio for me is that it has bird feeders in front of the dining area that have daily visits from the Hokkaido subspecies of the Eurasian red squirrel. This was one of the reasons that Mark had picked the hotel for the trip. When I got up, food had not been put out in the bird feeders yet, so I decided to go on the morning walk back to the swan feeding area. The snow was coming down pretty hard at this point and what had been a cleared road the previous night, now contained snow drifts that were 3-6 feet in height. It



was at this point that I realized we were not going anywhere that day. We got back to the hotel to have breakfast and within 10 minutes I was looking at my first squirrel. As the windows had a lot of ice on them, Mark told me to go outside to get some better shots. As soon as the





squirrel saw me, it started to bolt up a tree, however with my practiced squirrel squeaking, I was able to rope him back in.



Mark

broke the news to everyone that we were snowed in for the day. So, I pretty much relaxed, watched the squirrel and the various other birds that showed up to the feeders (eurasian jays, grey

headed woodpecker, coal, marsh and varied tits, hawfinchs, great spotted woodpeckers, and oddly a white tailed fish eagle in the trees above the feeders). That evening a small group of us decided to walk back towards the swans to stretch our legs. At this point the snow was still coming down and the entire main road was covered in snow drifts of varying heights. There was also a strong wind that was making the snow drifts change quickly. It also made for some comical walking attempts. At one point one of my co-travelers fell in a snow drift that was about 5 feet tall. I tried to help her up, only to fall myself. No matter how hard I tried to stand the wind kept knocking me over, until I finally dragged myself in a small tunnel I dug out to pull myself up against a tree. Lets just say it will not go down as one of my finer moments in life.

Day 16 – this was supposed to be the day we drove to the Shiretoko Peninsula to go out on a boat to the sea ice to see the Stellar sea eagles. Mother nature of course had other plans. The entire peninsula roadways were closed. Pretty much  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the roadways along eastern Hokkaido were closed because of all the snow drifts. We were told the highway in front of the hotel was going to be plowed and that we would try to see how far we could get towards the peninsula for the next day. A lone squirrel made an appearance at the bird feeders prior to us leaving. So what should have been 30-40 minutes in the bus, turned out to be 4-5 hours in the bus as we went from closed road to closed road to closed road to try to find an ending spot. We finally cut our losses in the city of Nakashibetsu and stayed at a city hotel for the night. A birding group who had also been weather defeated also ended up at the

hotel.

Day 16 – the snow had stopped at this point, but the wind was still pretty strong. Not only were all the roads to the peninsula still closed, but power in most parts of the area was out. This meant no sea eagles along the ice. We found out the roads towards Lake Furen on the Notsuke Peninsula were open however, and there was a small coffee shop that places fish blocks out on the ice for the eagles. We got to the lake right after the blocks were put out and within 45 minutes the blocks were eaten. We also saw a few stag Japanese deer by the lake and crossing the ice, but at a considerable distance for a good photo. That night we were supposed to stay at the Yoroushi Daiichi Hot Springs Lodge that I mentioned in the start of this blog. That morning the roads to the lodge were still closed, however in the afternoon we got a call that a portion of the road would be open after 4 pm. We left the Notsuke Peninsula and decided to make our way towards the lodge. Everything seemed fine until about the last 3-4 km which I refer lovingly as the death drive. At this point the road was covered in snow and points there were towers of snow 2-3 times the height of the bus along both sides of the road. How our bus driver managed to get us there safely, I will never know. The lodge is a big spot for birders as it has a small pool along a river that is baited with fish. This attracts the resident Blakiston's fish owls that live in the area. The lodge has a large open room with a huge window that overlooks the river. Right behind the window are groupings of bird feeders that attract some of the same birds that I saw at the Pension Papilio, but in larger numbers. This was also the place I was excited to find Japanese martens, however I found out on this trip that it was not martens I was looking at, but sables. The Japanese name for sables is Ezokuroten which translates to Hokkaido black marten. Ten in Japanese refers to the family of martens, but is also used to name the Japanese marten itself. Many Japanese call any of the marten family “ten” including the people who worked at the hotel. This would make a person think that the sable was a Japanese marten. Mark explained to me that Japanese martens are not native to Hokkaido and were introduced by the fur industry. He said they also are not found normally along the eastern part of the island. He showed me pictures and I looked at stuffed specimens in the Kushiro museum. The Japanese martens had a sleeker face and Mark told me they usually have some form of a facial black mask. Vladimir pointed out to me that some people think the sable and the Japanese marten are conspecific. After a little back and forth chatter (weird, right?) I finally got him to commit that he has them separate on his life list, so sable it is! I got to watch up to three different sable the entire time I was there.









That night during one of my sable watching times, Vicki pointed out that something really large had just flown by. We were off to the side of the main window so walked over to the center and were then looking at our first Blakiston's fish owl, the offspring of the resident pair from the previous year. This of course created a photo frenzy with a birding group that was also staying at the hotel and I almost got shoved off of where I was standing by an over zealous owl lover. Thankfully I was pretty much twice as tall as him, so I was able to hold my own.



Day 17 – the majority of the roads along eastern Hokkaido were still pretty much closed. I spent the early morning (5 am) gazing at the resident sables. Mark had gone out early by himself this morning and told me that he thought he had caught a glimpse of a Siberian flying squirrel (damn!) as well as seeing another sable on his walk. He then told me he squeaked at it, which made me proud. Around 6:30

am I noticed some movement and looked up to see a Eurasian red squirrel running around and at times considering crossing the river from branches towards the bird feeders. One of the sables was sitting right in front of the feeders at this point, and at times I thought there was going to be one less squirrel in Hokkaido. However, I think the sable had, had his fill at the feeders and sat and watched the squirrel like I did.





In the afternoon we went to a local wood block printer, then came back to the hotel. In the evening we walked around the road in front of the hotel and were rewarded with sightings of the resident Blakiston's fish owls by the river. That night included more sable watching and a trip to the onsen. The lodge had a lot of photos along the walls of animals that had showed up. They had pictures of a Japanese weasel that based on the green grass, looked like it had been taken in warmer months. Mark told me the sables usually don't come near

the lodge in the summer, so my guess would be this was when the picture was taken. I can't imagine the sable letting its fellow mustelid have a go at the feeders when it was there.

Day 18 – early morning sable watch, saw the lone squirrel again, then left the hotel. We drove back towards Kushiro to catch our flight to Tokyo. Along the way we stopped at Lake Masyuko and the Mount Iwo Fumoroles to take some pictures. We had one last look at the Japanese red crowned cranes and the swans at lake Kussharo as well. We spent the night at the Hotel Okura in Tokyo.

Day 19 – home

A couple thoughts about my trip-

-In the last year I have gone on a lot of group trips. As usual the majority of the people in the trip fall under the category of people who really shouldn't be on a trip that is wildlife focused. If on day two you are going to complain , “are we really going to look at cranes again tomorrow” on a trip with cranes in the title, maybe you should have gone on a carnival cruise instead. That being said there were a couple people who seemed either really into the birds (one person had been to Antarctica 13 times!!!), or really into anything they were shown. I thought that Mark did an amazing job and I would love to travel with him again.

-Japan has a lot of rules when it comes to shoes. I was under the impression that it just involved you take your shoes off when you go inside. Well, that is true in some ways, however in some places you had to wear slippers, others you could only have your socks. In some places socks are the source of the plague and should never touch any surface. In some of the lodges they had this slightly elevated area that “back in the day” you were supposed to put your sword on. We were strictly warned never to place any shoes or really anything on it (I traveled without a sword on this trip). I had already been called out on foot “crimes” and to my horror, the first time I went back to my room after it had been made up, one of the maids had put some of my belongings on the sword shrine area. I had to quickly clean it before someone (Mark) saw this. I felt like by the end of the trip I got all the foot and room rules down, only to go back to the US to my wicked western shoe wearing ways.

-Japan left me wanting more. I loved so much about it and now I need to go back in the summer to see more warm weather loving species. I would love to actually see the Shiretoko Peninsula, but maybe without snow and with a brown bear. Mark had told me that the Yamabiko Lodge on Honshu is still a reliable spot for Large Japanese Field Mice, Japanese dormice as well as Japanese flying squirrel. Plus I now think the Ryukyu flying foxes are a must see. They are the fuzziest flying foxes I have ever seen. The list goes on.

-Japanese do a lot of bowing and waving. This includes when groups leave hotels, a waving committee stands outside the hotel and waves at leaving patrons. I also saw for the in country flights, the landing crew bowing at the planes as they were arriving and departing. I think the next hotel I stay at I will feel a little jipped that no one is waving good-bye to me.

-About 60% -70% of the food I ate was pretty much unrecognizable to me. Of that only about 10% was not edible.

## Species List

1. Kyushu Japanese Deer – *Cervus nippon nippon*
2. Honshu Japanese Deer – *Cervus nippon aplodontus*



3. Hokkaido Japanese Deer – *Cervus nippon yesoensis*
4. Japanese macaque – *Macaca fuscata*
5. Japanese serow – *Capricornis crispus*
6. Hokkaido Eurasian red squirrel – *Sciurus vulgaris orientis*
7. Hokkaido red fox – *Vulpes vulpes schrencki*
8. Japanese sable – *Martes zibellina brachyura*