



JAPAN BIRDING TOUR: SPECTACULAR WINTER BIRDS

GENERAL INFORMATION



Blakiston's Fish Owl is one of the many spectacular birds possible on our Japan birding tour.

OUR JAPAN BIRDING TOUR

Featuring a long list of highly desirable species, including some of the most spectacular birds in the world, our winter Japan birding tour visits three of the five main islands that make up this huge archipelagic country. We will go birding in Hokkaido, Kyushu, and Honshu on this Japanese winter birdwatching tour and we will also take a ferry ride to the small endemic-filled island, Miyake-Jima, looking for albatrosses along the way. Our Japan bird tour will also offer an insight into the fascinating cultural history of Japan, which is unlike anywhere else in the world.

Some of the many exciting birds we look for on our Japanese winter bird tour include **Red-crowned Crane, Hooded Crane, White-naped Crane**, (with luck possibly even the Critically Endangered ([BirdLife International](#)) **Siberian Crane**), **Black-faced Spoonbill, Baikal Teal, Falcated Duck, Steller's Sea Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, Blakiston's Fish Owl, Ural Owl, Saunders's Gull, Black-tailed Gull, Japanese Murrelet, Laysan Albatross, Short-tailed Albatross, Black-footed Albatross, Copper Pheasant, Japanese Green Woodpecker, Izu Thrush, Owston's Tit, Varied Tit, Izu Robin**, and **Asian Rosy Finch**.

Our tour starts in the southern city of Kagoshima on the island of Kyushu and ends in Tokyo near Haneda Airport on Honshu Island. We recommend you book international flights into Kagoshima and out of Haneda for this tour.

Please note we can offer custom bird tours in Japan at other times of the year to target summer breeding species, for example, that visit Japan and are tricky to see on their wintering grounds. Targets can include **Japanese Robin, Japanese Thrush, Narcissus Flycatcher, Japanese Leaf Warbler, Ijima's Leaf Warbler, Sakhalin Leaf Warbler, Marsh Grassbird, Oriental Stork, Pleske's Grasshopper Warbler, Sakhalin Grasshopper Warbler, Middendorf's Grasshopper Warbler**, and **Yellow Bunting**. Please email us if you are interested in looking for these exciting species on a custom Japanese birding tour.

ITINERARY AND SPECIES RECORDING (BIRD LISTS AND ANIMAL LISTS)

Ahead of our Japan birdwatching tour we will send you a detailed daily itinerary (along with arrival instructions). We will then provide you with a printed copy of the itinerary on the first day of the tour.

The printed copy of the itinerary will include a bird list and list of other animals possible on the tour and we will go through this each night (but it is totally optional whether you join or not – though it is considered extremely useful). We always use the latest version of the [International Ornithological Congress](#) (IOC) taxonomy for our bird list and for all other wildlife, we use the [International Union for Conservation of Nature](#) (IUCN) taxonomy. While birding during the tour we will create [eBird checklists](#) and these will be shared with any participants who wish to have a copy. Just provide us with your eBird user details at the beginning of the tour for us to do this.

Each evening, we will go through the itinerary to give you any specific information to be aware of for the following day (like what clothes and equipment will be needed, when we will be having breakfast, departure time from the hotel, and any important birds we will be looking for, etc.).

After the completion of the tour, we will email you a PDF copy of an illustrated trip report. This will include a complete IOC and IUCN checklist of all wildlife recorded during the tour. Any interesting bird, animal, or landscape photographs will be included in the trip report and will also

be added to our tour-specific [Flickr pages](#) as a reminder, and you are able to download these for free and share with your friends and family.

DAILY ACTIVITIES, PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS, AND TOUR PACE

This Japanese birdwatching tour is not considered too physically demanding (though coldness in the north can increase tiredness and care should be taken at all times due to the potential for snow or ice). We will spend the majority of the time birding on easy to moderate trails and roadsides at a range of elevations and will experience cool conditions throughout, with potentially warmer conditions in the south and cooler (including very cold) temperatures in the north. Given the high likelihood of snow and ice in mountainous areas of Honshu and while on Hokkaido, extreme caution should be taken when walking, with slips and falls a serious risk. We recommend items to bring in the “What to Bring” sections of this document, below, which may reduce your risk of slips, trips, and falls.

On this tour we will try to use as much daylight time as possible and be out from dawn-to-dusk. Approximate sunrise and sunset times when we run our tour are Kyushu (06:45-18:15 hrs.), Hokkaido (06:00-17:00 hrs.), and Honshu (06:10-17:30 hrs.). Our birding start time will sometimes be dependent on breakfast timings at the hotel, but we will mostly have breakfast before heading out for our birding.

This is a birding-focused tour that does offer some good incidental photo opportunities, though these are secondary to the actual birding element of the tour, i.e. seeing the many endemic species and subspecies of the country as well as other overwintering specialties, will be considered the priority. That said, some good photo opportunities are available at many of the sites we will be visiting.

Some days we will have domestic flights, but the majority of these are short with a relatively short check in time. Most drives on the tour are relatively short and some may be around the three to four hour mark, but will likely include birding stops. Please note that on longer drives our driver may occasionally need to take a short break for safety. This will generally be done at a place where there is some birding or other activity available (such as lunch). Everyone’s safety is our concern on this and all of our tours. More details on transportation and domestic flights are provided in the relevant sections below.

Note that on this tour we stay for two nights at a lodge in Yoroushi on Hokkaido, where we have two opportunities to observe the Endangered (BirdLife International) Blakiston’s Fish Owl. This will require sitting and waiting in a heated lounge area watching a section of lighted river where, with luck, an owl may drop in. Sometimes the owl will come in the early evening, at other times it might be just before dawn, or at other times it could be in the middle of the night. So in order to see this bird it might require a very late night or a very early morning birding session. The lodge maintains a logbook of sightings, which might give us a clue on recent timings, which can prove useful, but it’s worth been prepared for a long night. But at least the lounge is very comfortable and we’re not sitting in the freezing outdoors. Note that your driver/guide is unlikely to sit up all night as s/he will be required to be fully rested in order to safely drive and guide you the following day. But don’t worry, if the owl comes in, it will be close and is the size of a Great Dane, so it is tough to miss, this is the largest owl in the world with an enormous wingspan!

PASSPORT, VISA, AND LOCAL LAWS

To visit Japan, most visitors will require a visa and are granted a free three months (90 days) visa on arrival. Please refer to your own government information for additional details on entry requirements which may vary slightly depending on your nationality. It is likely that you will have to show proof of onward travel on arrival in Japan and may need to provide an address for your stay (we will provide this information to you in the arrival instructions). Some airlines will not let you check in and board a plane to Japan without first seeing that you have an onward ticket to leave at the end of your visit. Please make sure that you have all the necessary documents required and please [contact us](#) if you have any questions.

Your passport should be valid for the duration of your stay. You must always carry your passport with you. The police can arrest you if you cannot show proof of your visa status.

Japan has some very strict customs rules regarding what can and cannot be taken in or out of the country, please read the full details [here](#). It is highly unlikely anyone would bring these items on a birding tour, however it's useful to be fully aware of the regulations. Note that it is illegal to bring meat products, including sausages, bacon, and ham, to Japan without permission from the [Japanese Animal Quarantine Service](#) (penalties are severe and can include fines and prison sentences. Be aware that some products may be available in Japan (such as whale meat) but taking it to your home country could result in fines or prison sentences on arrival there.

For ease of entry, you should register your visit on the Visit Japan website [here](#), you will get a QR code to make your arrival experience smoother. You can save this QR code on your phone to present when requested or you can print it out and bring a hard copy with you. Note that if you are unable to access the website (or if the website goes down), you can either complete the information on your phone in the arrivals area (which can be a little tricky), or you can fill in a paper version with the data required at the baggage claim hall (location may vary depending on arrival airport).

Please make sure that you bring a photocopy of your passport with you on the tour, this can be kept with other important documents like vaccination certificates, emergency contact details, and insurance documents.

Smoking is illegal on the streets of Tokyo and some other cities. Smoke only in designated areas (if you are a smoker please refer to the Birding Ecotours guidance on smoking [here](#)). It is illegal to carry some common prescription or over-the-counter medicines under Japan's strictly-enforced law on anti-stimulant drugs, such as Vicks inhalers, medicines for allergies and sinus problems, cold and flu medication containing pseudoephedrine and some painkillers containing codeine. Ignorance of the law does not count as a defense.

Most Japanese people are welcoming and friendly but can be reserved. Loud, boisterous behavior may receive negative attention. Showing affection in public is less common than in the UK and US.

Tattoos have a historical association with organized crime in Japan. While acceptance is increasing, some public facilities do not admit people with tattoos – for example, public swimming pools, hot springs, beaches and some gyms. Other establishments request you cover tattoos while using the facilities.

Please be aware that in Japan it is illegal to carry a knife with a blade 2.3 inches / 6 centimeters or longer, and this can include items that many birders take on tours without a second thought, such as a Swiss Army knife or a Leatherman multi-tool device. Penalties can include jail time or fines.

LOCAL CUSTOMS AND ETIQUETTE

Please refer to the specific local customs and etiquette document that we will email you ahead of the tour.

TRAVEL INSURANCE

As mentioned in our standard [Terms and Conditions](#), we strongly encourage you to purchase comprehensive trip cancellation insurance to protect against unexpected events that might cause delays and interruptions to travel. It is important that the insurance covers illness, medical issues, accidents, repatriation, loss of luggage or any valuable items that you might be bringing (e.g. optical and camera equipment) etc.

HEALTH AND PESTS

We rate our Japanese bird tours as one of the easier destinations to visit from a health point of view, though we do recommend you consult your doctor or local travel clinic regarding vaccine requirements before your bird tour to Japan. We recommend doing this around two months prior to the tour start date so that any required vaccine courses can be completed in time for your departure.

There is no risk of Yellow Fever in Japan and there is not currently (August 2024) any certificate requirement for anyone arriving from countries with a risk of Yellow Fever transmission. Please refer to the World Health Organization's list of countries where Yellow Fever transmission is possible, [here](#).

Everyone visiting Japan should be up to date with standard vaccinations and boosters, like Diphtheria-Tetanus-Pertussis, Chickenpox (Varicella), Flu, Covid-19, Polio, Shingles, and Measles-Mumps-Rubella (MMR). Other vaccinations that might be required (depending on your personal situation, and to be confirmed by your travel clinic/doctor), include Hepatitis A, Hepatitis B, Japanese Encephalitis, Tick-borne Encephalitis, Cholera, Tetanus, and Rabies. Airborne and droplet transmitted diseases such as Tuberculosis (TB), Avian/Bird Flu, and Hantavirus are present.

Please refer to the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) website [here](#), for further information on vaccines and how to stay healthy on the tour. Another great source of data is the "[Travel Health Pro](#)" website and information on Japan can be seen [here](#). All three linked webpages, and any others from your home government are worth studying ahead of joining our tour.

Tap water is potable throughout Japan and safe to drink in all areas we will visit. Some hotels will provide bottled drinking water, nevertheless, tap water is still safe in these areas. We will not be providing drinking water on this tour, so please bring a refillable bottle with you to hold your own supply. Contaminated water and soil/floodwater could cause Leptospirosis so we recommend staying out of wet ditches etc.

If you pick up any scratches from plants (see the "Dangerous Animals and Plants" section below) or receive any bites from insects, they should be cleaned, treated with antiseptic cream/wipes, and covered quickly to reduce the chance of any infection.

Sunscreen (rated SPF 30+) should be used frequently on clear and sunny days (particularly in the

south), and a sunhat should be worn to protect from the sun's powerful rays, with sunglasses used to help prevent glare (particularly likely in northern and mountainous areas with snow where glare will be bad, and when on boat trips/ferry crossings). A plentiful intake of water (please bring a reusable water bottle) is essential to maintain hydration.

Given that this is a winter tour we will be experiencing some cold weather, so maintaining body heat will also be very important. A flask for hot drinks such as tea/coffee will be very useful. Care should also be taken when walking on potentially slippery surfaces, these can occur in more remote outside areas or right outside on our hotel doorstep! We recommend useful equipment for this tour in the "What to Bring" section below.

There is a risk of altitude sickness when travelling to destinations of 8,200 feet (2,500 meters), however we won't be going above this elevation on our tour.

MEDICAL CONDITIONS

It is vital that you are suitably covered with comprehensive medical insurance in case any emergency situation occurs while on our Japanese bird tour. Medical facilities in Japan are of a high quality, but treatment is expensive. Expect to pay the whole cost of any treatment you receive. If you don't have insurance, the cost for medical care is likely to be very high. Medical facilities may check your insurance, which could delay your treatment.

As detailed in our standard Terms and Conditions, we require you to tell us, when signing up for this Japanese bird tour, of any medical conditions that we should be aware of. Please tell us if you have any walking/mobility (including stability) issues, diabetes, epilepsy, food and medicinal allergies, heart conditions, and long-term illnesses etc. This will make things easier for us, and you, if an unexpected situation arises.

DANGEROUS ANIMALS AND PLANTS

There are not many concerns in Japan during a winter tour. Japanese Fugu Fish (Puffer Fish) is a deadly fish that can kill humans even when it is dead. This fish is a Japanese delicacy that contains tetrodotoxin, which is toxic to humans when consumed. Chefs must adhere to strict rules when preparing the fish to be eaten, and probably best to be avoided. Most potentially dangerous animals in Japan are not likely to be active during the winter (e.g. bears and snakes should be hibernating). Thus, the chances of coming into contact with them are low, though we will of course maintain care and caution. If a snake is found in the warmer parts of the country we will be visiting, we will give it a cautious view from a safe distance. Any monkey sighting should be carefully managed, to avoid undue stress on them or us. Monkeys can lash out if threatened. Leeches can occur in some parts of the country, as can ticks, though, again due to this being a winter tour, meeting with these creatures is unlikely.

There are numerous poisonous plants in Japan, many of which can easily be mistaken for common edible plants, so we recommend not eating any plants, even if you might think you know what they are. Some plants may be decorated with fierce looking spikes, so be careful about where you put your hands if moving through vegetation.

FOOD, WATER, AND MEALS

Tap water is safe throughout Japan so we will not be supplying water on this tour. Bottled mineral water is also available everywhere. Most 7-Eleven convenience stores (which are excellent in this part of the world) provide free hot water (as well as having coffee etc. machines). Japan is surely the vending machine capital of the world and hot and cold drinks are within easy reach even at far out locations: on the side of the road, in hotel lobbies, at gas stations etc. Some vending machines even offer beer! Coffee and tea making facilities are often provided in the bedrooms, however, these may be of local liking (such as only jasmine tea, green tea, or coffee sachets containing sugar/milk). If you prefer black tea or a particular type of coffee, we recommend bringing your own supply. Please bring a reusable water bottle to reduce plastic waste, and a thermos-type flask is useful for keeping hot drinks warm.

Breakfasts are available in most hotels and usually consist of rice balls, toast, jam, and coffee (often no black tea) and other items, sometimes including fruit, eggs, ham, and some Japanese local/regional dishes, including pickles.

Lunches are usually taken from convenience store chains such as 7-Eleven, Family Mart, and Lawsons as we travel between birding sites. These stores usually offer cold food such as sandwiches, fruit, yoghurts, bread, cold meat and fish, cheeses, cakes, chips (crisps), dried fruit, sushi, and hot dishes and items such as chicken, sausage, bread, yakitori (meat skewers), bento boxes, and pot noodles (of a million varieties). It is possible to get food heated in most convenience stores, and hot water is available if you want to get a hot drink or make noodles etc. The hot options are very welcome while birding in the cold regions.

Evening meals are included at most Japanese-style hotels and some hotels have their own restaurants. Where appropriate, or necessary, we may eat out at restaurants within a short distance of the hotel. Meal options are of a typical Japanese fare and may include sushi, okonomiyaki, miso soup, yakitori, udon, takoyaki, soba, sukiyaki, sashimi, unagi, tofu, onigiri, shabu-shabu, tempura, ramen, tonkatsu, and of course, rice. Fish, seafood, beef, and chicken are commonly encountered.

Japanese cuisine encompasses the regional and traditional foods of Japan, which have developed through centuries of political, economic, and social change. The traditional cuisine of Japan is based on rice with miso soup, and other dishes with an emphasis on seasonal ingredients. Side dishes often consist of fish, pickled vegetables, and vegetables cooked in broth. Common seafood is often grilled, but it is also sometimes served raw as sashimi or as sushi. Seafood and vegetables are also deep-fried in a light batter, as tempura. Apart from rice, another staple is noodles, such as soba and udon. Japan has many simmered dishes, such as fish products in broth called oden, or beef in sukiyaki and nikujaga.

Mealtimes are likely to be variable, depending on our birding or travel plans for the day, thus, if you need to eat food at a specific time of day (e.g. to take with medication) we recommend that you bring or buy snacks from a 7-Eleven to supplement the meals. A supply of cereal bars/protein bars, dried fruit etc. can come in useful. There will likely be daily opportunities to restock snack supplies.

If you have any dietary requirements or food allergies, please let us know when booking the tour, so that we can advise whether it will be suitable for you. We also want to notify the people who will be preparing meals, ahead of time where possible.

CURRENCY AND MONEY

Japan has maintained a predominantly cash-based culture. The local currency is called the Japanese Yen (Yen/JPY/¥). Japanese Yen is the third most traded currency in the world and can be found in the following denominations: banknotes ¥1,000, ¥2,000, ¥5,000, ¥10,000 and coins ¥1, ¥5, ¥10, ¥50, ¥100, ¥500. The banknotes are some of the largest in the world so don't easily fit into every wallet or purse! Japan is one of the safest countries for carrying cash, as the crime rate is very low. There will be limited opportunities for changing cash, so we recommend that you change everything at the airport at the beginning of the tour. Note that since the Covid-19 pandemic many places do now accept credit cards, where they didn't before, so this recent change does make things easier in general.

ATMs, which accept non-Japanese cards, can sometimes be scarce, they can usually be found in airports and post offices or, more conveniently for birders, they can increasingly be found in 7-Eleven stores around the country. The current (August 2024) exchange rate for Japanese Yen against major global currencies is approximately US \$1 = ¥147, GBP £1 = ¥189, Euro €1 = ¥162, and AUS \$1 = ¥97.

Tipping is not expected in Japan, with staff paid high wages and service charges built into costs paid.

ACCOMMODATION

Please note that Japanese hotels and guesthouses operate slightly differently from the norm in the United States or the United Kingdom. During our tour we will utilize a range of standard business hotels and some local hotels and guesthouses.

Business hotels have similar facilities to international hotels found in the US, UK etc., although rooms tend to be quite small, or very small, compared to other countries. The bathrooms are generally pre-packed (almost like a small box inserted in the room), with sit in baths and showers.

Japanese style rooms have futons on the floor, which are rolled out each night. In these properties, bathroom and lavatory facilities are usually shared, and they tend to have a Japanese bath, sometimes a full Onsen (hot spring), which is a shared facility separated by gender, where you need to shower and wash before entering the bath (which is for relaxation). Note that single rooms are sometimes not possible at these properties, but we do try to reserve them where available.

We spend one night on a ferry as we travel between Tokyo and Miyake-Jima Island. Here we will have "Special 2nd Class Cabins" on the way out and "2nd Class Cabins" on the way back (when we'll be concentrating more on the birding!). Images [here](#).

ELECTRICITY

In Japan the power plugs and sockets (outlets) are of Type A and Type B. The standard voltage is 100 volts (V), and the standard frequency is 50 / 60 hertz (Hz). Further details and photos of this plug and information on the electricity supply in Japan can be found [here](#), this link also allows you to type in your home country and will tell you if you will need to bring a travel adaptor and/or a voltage converter, as well as tell you if you need to consider frequency differences. All places we stay on our tour should have electricity 24 hours a day unless there is an unexpected power outage,

such as the result of a storm or other unforeseen event.

COMMUNICATIONS

There is phone signal across most of Japan and most, if not all, the accommodations we stay in will have Wi-Fi. Connections cannot be guaranteed but are generally good, unless something unexpected occurs. The international country code for Japan is +81 and the outgoing code is 00, followed by the relevant country code, such as 44 for the UK, so to phone the UK from Japan would be 0044, etc. Most modern iPhone and Android smartphones from the US and UK will work fine in Japan.

You may want to purchase a local SIM card on arrival in Japan or use your own provider on a roaming package (be aware of charges). You can usually purchase a travel SIM from the airport or a convenience store. We are sometimes able to provide a portable Wi-Fi hotspot that can be linked to whilst in the vehicle (though streaming services are not permitted, to preserve data for everyone).

TRANSPORTATION

The tour starts in Kagoshima and ends in Tokyo (Haneda airport area). You will need to book a flight for the beginning of the tour to arrive in Kagoshima and to depart from Tokyo. We recommend a flight out of Haneda, since it's the closest airport to where the tour will end. If you need to depart from Tokyo's other airport (Narita), you should be aware that it's approximately one hour's drive from Haneda (and a US\$200 taxi ride). We will take two domestic flights during the tour, for more information see the "Domestic Flights" section.

We will use air-conditioned vehicles on this tour (also with heating!). Depending on the final group size the group may be split across two vehicles. Roads are generally good and paved, but nevertheless suffer from the freezing weather the country often endures, thus potholes are a frequent sighting. In Hokkaido we will use vehicles kitted out specifically for snow and ice conditions.

We will take a ferry ride from Tokyo to the island of Miyake-Jima and back, please see the "Ferry Trip to Miyake-Jima" section. There will be opportunities for birding on the afternoon trip on the way back to Tokyo, weather permitting. We will also take a birdwatching cruise while in Hokkaido (weather permitting), this Rausu Sea Ice cruise will last approximately two to three hours and should provide excellent birdwatching and good photographic experiences (hopefully of the magnificent Steller's Sea Eagle). It is likely to be very cold birding on deck while on the boat, so warm clothing is essential.

FERRY TRIP TO MIYAKE-JIMA

The boat usually (and currently) leaves Tokyo at 22:30 hrs. and arrives in Miyake-Jima at 05:00 hrs. The ferry then leaves Miyake-Jima at 13:35 hrs., arriving back in Tokyo at 19:40 hrs. The ferry has a Wi-Fi connection.

During the winter there is a moderate chance that the ferry service might get cancelled due to poor weather. If that happens, we have an alternative plan that will involve some birding in the Tokyo

area. We will only have the one chance for the pelagic and island birding trip. If the weather prevents the trip, we will be unable to go and we are unable to reschedule the trip.

There is a small chance that if the weather deteriorates while we are on the island, we may need to spend a night on the island unexpectedly. In this rare scenario, we might not get back to Tokyo at the time/date planned in the itinerary. It would therefore be prudent to book an extra night in Tokyo for the night of Day 14 (not included in the tour cost) and then have an international flight booked for the following day (i.e.: 24 hrs. later than in this itinerary, so what would be “Day 15”). We can help book this extra ‘security’ night if you wish, in the same hotel, and we can also arrange additional birding or sightseeing excursions in Tokyo, if you should wish to explore this fascinating city, or just relax after an exciting couple weeks’ winter birding in Japan.

You could also opt to fly out of Tokyo on Day 14, if you wish, as indicated in the itinerary. It is impossible to predict if the weather will cause any issues with this pelagic trip until the day before/day of the trip. We will, of course, monitor the situation and check with the ferry operator ahead of time, to try and reduce any issues due to cancellations and delays, but these factors are ultimately out of our hands.

DOMESTIC FLIGHTS

Our Japan tour requires two domestic flights, and the costs for these are included in the tour cost. The flights will be from Miyazaki to Kushiro (likely via Tokyo) and Kushiro to Tokyo. The hold weight allowance for these domestic flights will be 44 pounds (lbs) / 20 kilograms (kgs) and the hand luggage allowance will be 15 lbs / 7 kg.

WEATHER/CLIMATE

February is usually a fairly dry month, but there could be rain or snow anywhere at this time. Expected average temperatures during our tour are as follows: Kyushu 58°F (10°C), Honshu 50°F (7°C), and Hokkaido 30°F (-5°C). Note that if it is windy, the chill from the wind can make the temperature feel much colder (i.e. the “feel like temperature”), and in Hokkaido this could make the temperature feel as low as 5°F (-15°C).

A dry bag is recommended for protecting camera/optics, waterproofs from rain, and suitable clothing is essential, see the “What to Bring” section below for our top suggestions on what clothing to take on a Japanese winter birding tour.

The sun is not particularly strong at this time of year, though care should be taken to remain hydrated, and use sun protection.

NATURAL DISASTERS

Japan sits along the “Ring of Fire”, a tectonic belt of volcanoes and earthquakes, about 90% of the world’s earthquakes occur within the belt. Japan is prone to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions and these can sometimes result in tsunamis. Japan can also be at the peril of tropical cyclones, with risks of floods and landslides also occurring as a result (though our tour is timed outside the usual cyclone season). Mt Fuji, a stratovolcano located on the island of Honshu, has a summit elevation of 12,389 feet (3,776 meters). The volcano last erupted from 1707 to 1708 and is located about 62

miles (100 kilometers) to the southwest of Tokyo. Its snow-capped peak is visible from the Japanese capital on clear days (keep eyes peeled when landing at, or taking off from, Tokyo's Haneda airport for a good view of this stunning natural landmark.

Most of these events are totally unpredictable, however Japan has some of the safest building structures and best evacuation plans in the world. If any unexpected event such as an earthquake or volcanic eruption occurs, please follow recommended guidance. It is always worth looking over evacuation plans in your hotel accommodation on arrival there. The [Japan Meteorological Agency](#) website contains useful information. The [Disaster Prevention Information](#) document is also useful reading.

While the chance of a natural disaster occurring during a tour is small, their unpredictability means it's worth being prepared. The Japan Tourism Agency has a very useful [website](#) to help stay alert and prepared. And the website [here](#), with information from the Japan Meteorological Agency and local authorities is also very helpful.

LUGGAGE

Please pack as lightly as possible for this tour, noting the permissible weight allowance on the domestic flights, and the fact that most hotel rooms are much smaller than hotel rooms elsewhere in the world. A medium, soft-sided, and robust duffle bag is likely to work best for packing into the tour vehicles. We recommend a daypack to keep items that you wish to use daily, when in the vehicle, or when birding in the field/from the boat.

WHAT TO BRING: CLOTHING AND RELATED ITEMS

You will need a range of clothing on this tour, due to the vast temperature range (see the "Weather/Climate" section above). You will need to be prepared for all weather, including very cold, therefore please bring adequate layers. Our experience is that everyone feels the cold differently, so you may need to adjust your packing list accordingly.

- **Boots:** Snow-boots have the advantage of being waterproof and usually lined for warmth, and are generally easy to slip on and off. Otherwise, we recommend any waterproof, sturdy walking boots. In snowy areas we tend to stay on paths that are cleared, but fresh snowfall could mean a few inches of snow on the ground to be navigated.
- **Snow-grips:** These slip over boots and shoes and provide grip in icy conditions. They are an essential part of your winter birding kit and are invaluable at preventing slips and injury, particularly on Hokkaido and in the mountains of Honshu. You can get metal grips or rubber grips. Note that you should not carry these in your hand luggage as they will likely get confiscated by airport security at check points. A review of the various types of grips can be read [here](#).
- **Hiking Poles/Walking Sticks:** **A walking stick is compulsory for anyone who is unsteady walking**, as we feel this is a safety issue; we don't want anyone slipping on the trails or anywhere else.
- **Trainers/Walking shoes:** are fine for most daily activities away from the snowy places we expect to encounter on Hokkaido and in the mountains of Honshu. Note that waterproof shoes are best, as we could have rain anywhere.

- **Slipper Socks:** Not essential but can be helpful, particularly in areas where slippers are provided to be worn inside traditional Japanese inns, such as Yoroushi Onsen, which might be on the small size!
- **Socks:** Thin close-fitting inner socks work well in the cold conditions in combination with thicker outer socks to retain heat.
- **Foot Warmers and Hand Warmers:** Being stationary for long periods in cold conditions, such as on icy or snowy terrain, can make your feet cold, even with thick boots and suitable sock layers as described above. There are different sorts of warmers available and they give several hours of warmth once activated. Hand warmers can also be used on feet, and body warmers can also be purchased. It is usually possible to purchase these items from some convenience stores, but it would be recommended to have your own supply with you, in case they are out of stock.
- **Base-layer:** Thermal leggings/trousers and long-sleeved top are very useful (if not essential!). We recommend Merino wool fabric as it offers excellent heat retention, gives breathability and doesn't pick up odors. These items can usually be washed and dried very quickly in your room.
- **Long Pants/Trousers:** Hiking (Walking) pants/trousers or similar are ideal and allow for layers to be worn. Ski pants, although very warm, tend to be quite bulky and are probably not suitable. Avoid wearing jeans because if they get wet, they will be cold and take a long time to dry out.
- **Tops:** Above your base layer you can add T-shirts, shirts, sweaters (jumpers) as required. Quick-drying shirts are best.
- **Coats:** Layers are recommended. A windproof, waterproof, hooded outer layer is essential for this tour and below that a fleece and/or padded puffa/down jacket (which can often compress to a very small ball) will provide the best options.
- **Gloves, Hats, and Scarves:** As for socks, layers work best for gloves, with a thin, tight-fitting cotton/Marino wool layer below a thicker outer glove (like a ski-glove). Layered hats can also work well, with a thin thermal hat and a thicker outer hat over the top. Buffs and scarves around the neck can be very helpful in helping you retain heat. Hand warmers can be placed in gloves to help keep your hands warm, these often suffer most due to holding cold metal objects like tripods. A baseball hat/sunhat is also useful for our time in the warmer areas of Japan, where woolly hats are not likely to be required.
- **Umbrella:** A lightweight umbrella that can fold is very useful but not essential. It can help keep the worst of the rain off your upper body and optics/camera.

We recommend that you bring a selection of loose and lightweight field clothing with green, brown, or dark colors, as these work best for forest birding. Please avoid bright/pale colors, for example no white, red, orange etc. during birding time, particularly for layers of clothing that will be exposed (such as coats). Casual and informal dress is appropriate for the hotels/accommodation we use.

WHAT TO BRING: OTHER ITEMS

Do not forget: Binoculars, camera, field guide (see “Books” section below), flashlight (torch), spare batteries, power bank, converter plugs, plug adaptors, chargers, prescription drugs (please bring the generic names for these drugs with you and note information on what is and isn't allowed

to be brought into Japan), toiletries, prescription glasses (and a spare pair), insect repellent, sunscreen, sunglasses, alarm clock, money pouch, hiking poles/walking sticks, suggested medical kit (see [here](#)), flask (invaluable) and water bottles and daypacks.

Our tour leader/local guide will have a communal telescope for use during the tour. A scope can be quite useful on some parts of our Japan winter birding tour, particularly if we are looking out to sea for auks, ducks, gulls etc. from land, or scanning estuaries and mudflats etc. If you do have a scope, it would be helpful to bring it along. The communal scope will allow everyone opportunities to look at birds briefly on a rotation basis. If you like to “digi-scope/phone-scope”, or would like to take prolonged scope views of the birds, please bring your own scope, the communal scope will be for everyone to look at the birds and not for photography.

Additional items to remember include important travel documents, passport, cash (or ATM/credit cards to withdraw money), proof of vaccinations, and your travel or health insurance cards – photocopies of all can be carried by the tour leader in case of emergency.

We recommend bringing a couple of different colored pens and a 12-inch/30-centimeter plastic ruler, these can make the checklist session easier to follow.

Face masks are useful to carry in Japan. While mask-wearing is no longer mandatory, there can be recommendations from the Japanese government. Japan is a strong honor-based society, so if we do not follow recommendations closely, we may encounter difficulties at shops, restaurants, etc.

CRIME AND SAFETY

Japan is generally considered a very safe country with many friendly people, nevertheless you should take the same precautions you would at home. Place valuables in a secure place, such as a hotel safe, when you can and keep belongings in sight when travelling. Always remain vigilant of your surroundings.

LANGUAGE

The official and national language in Japan is Japanese, and English is not very widely spoken. Signs in key areas such as airports, train stations, and some larger hotels in big cities (such as in Tokyo) may have English included, which is extremely helpful. Some convenience stores (such as 7-Eleven) do include English information on their labels, which is very useful when selecting lunches and snacks!

BOOKS

Birds of Japan – Otami Chikara (2019), Lynx Edicions. We recommend the flexibound version of this book, rather than the hardback for use in the field. The most up-to-date field guide (just) for birding in Japan, with very useful taxonomical information.

Helm Field Guides: Birds of Japan – Mark Brazil (2018), Helm. A solid paperback book which generally contains more written details than the above guide. It also has more helpful illustrations for some groups of birds, such as gulls, auks, and buntings for identification during winter season birding tours (e.g. more illustrations of non-breeding plumaged birds).

Both above books are excellent. Please take a look at our recommended [field guide blog](#) for additional information on this region. Some of the other bird books relevant to Japan include:

Helm Field Guides: Birds of East Asia – Eastern China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, and Eastern Russia – Mark Brazil (2009). Helm.

Seabirds: The New Identification Guide – Peter Harrison, Martin Perrow and Hans Larsson (2021). Lynx Edicions.

Oceanic Birds of the World: A Photo Guide – Steve N.G. Howell and Kirk Zufelt (2019). Princeton University Press.

Helm Identification Guide Series: Albatrosses, Petrels and Shearwaters of the World – Derek Onley and Paul Scofield (2007). Helm

Gulls of the World: A Photographic Guide – Klaus Malling Olsen (2018). Bloomsbury Publishing.

The Gull Guide: North America – Amar Ayyash (2024). Princeton University Press.

Helm Identification Guide Series: Gulls of Europe, Asia, and North America – Klaus Malling Olsen (2004). Helm.

Gulls Simplified: A Comparative Approach to Identification – Pete Dunne and Kevin T Karlson (2018). Princeton University Press.

An Identification Guide to the Gulls of Japan [Japanese] – Osao Ujihara and Michiaki Ujihara (2019). Seibundōshinkōsha.

Helm Identification Guide Series: Wildfowl: An Identification Guide to the Ducks, Geese and Swans of the World – Steve Madge and Hilar Burn (1992). Helm.

An Identification Guide to the Ducks of Japan [Japanese] – Osao Ujihara and Michiaki Ujihara (2015). Seibundōshinkōsha.

Other specific-interest books, such as those covering reptiles, mammals, and other aspects of natural history, etc.:

JAPANimals: History and Culture in Japan’s Animal Life – Gregory M. Pflugfelder and Brett L. Walker (Eds) (2025). University of Michigan Press.

The Nature of Japan: From Dancing Cranes to Flying Fish – Mark Brazil and Hisashi Masuda (2013). Japan Nature Guides.

Natural Heritage of Japan: Geological, Geomorphological, and Ecological Aspects – Abhik Chakraborty et al (Eds). 2017. Springer Nature.

Common and Iconic Mammals of Japan [English / Japanese] – Mark Brazil and Masayuki Yabuuchi (2015). Japan Nature Guides.

Guide to the Amphibians and Reptiles of Japan – Richard C. Goris and Norio Maeda (2024). Krieger.

Perhoskompassi, Osa 1: Kaakkois-Aasia, Indo-Australi, Japani [Butterfly Compass, Volume 1: Southeast Asia, Indo-Australia, Japan] – Tari Haahtela (2015). Tibiale Oy.

The Moths in Japan [Japanese] – Yasunori Kishida (2020). Gakken Publishers.

Kew Pocketbooks: Japanese Plants – Kew Botanic Gardens (2020). Royal Botanic Gardens.

SOUND RECORDINGS

You can listen to and download a range of Japanese bird calls and songs from the excellent [xeno-canto](#) bird sound library. Additional recordings may be found on [eBird](#) species accounts and some of the apps referenced below.

USEFUL WEBSITE RESOURCES AND APPS

[Aves Vox](#) – this app allows you to download a good selection of bird songs from the [xeno-canto](#) website onto your smart phone.

[eBird/Merlin](#) – stacks of information, easy to gather on your smart phone or other devices such as tablets and computers. Sound, photo, and video galleries exist for almost every species in Japan, via the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's [Macaulay Library](#). Note that Merlin also contains photos of birds in plumages not always illustrated in the two major field guides to the country, so it is a useful additional resource.

[IOC World Bird List](#) – the website gives all the latest information on world bird taxonomy according to the scientific body that we use at Birding Ecotours. You can learn about species that have been newly described, any recent and past splits (creation of a new species) and lumps (deletion of a species) of existing species, and plenty of additional useful information on distribution and taxonomy. There are many endemic subspecies of widespread birds found in Japan, which could eventually become treated as separate species, this website will help you keep track of updates.

[Lonely Planet](#) – contains lots of general travel information on Japan, though some of the places we will be going to are not likely to be mentioned. If you are interested in extending your stay in Japan before or after the tour, such as visiting the impressive Mt Fuji, downtown Tokyo, or some of the ancient temples and shrines this will help you find some must-see places.