



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

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JAPAN

Date - June 2023

Duration - 23 Days

Destinations - Honshu

Tokyo - Mount Takao - Atsugi - Hakone - Lake Ashi - Lake Kawaguchi - Tateshina - Mount Tengu - Mount Lo - Joshin'etsukogen National Park - Nagano - Jigokudani Monkey Park - Shiga Kogen - Karuizawa - Karuizawa Wild Bird Forest - Mount Asama - Komoro - Chubu Sangaku National Park - Kamikochi - Myojin Pond - Tashiro-ike Pond - Nara - Nara Park - Kasugayama Primeval Forest - Lake Biwa - Osaka

Destinations - Hokkaido

Chitose - Lake Kanayama - Daisetsuzan National Park - Kitami - Lake Oketo - Abashiri - Komaba Kinohiroba Park - Shari - Shiretoko Peninsula - Utoro - Shiretoko National Park - Furepe Falls - Shiretoko Pass - Mount Rausu - Rausu - Kujiranomieruoka Park - Aidomari - Lake Rausu - Shibetsu - Poh River Nature And Historical Park - Notsuke Peninsula - Lake Furen - Shunkunitai - Nemuro - Cape Nosappu - Cape Ochiishi - Cape Kiritappu - Kushiro Shitsugen National Park - Otowa Bridge - Akan Mashu National Park - Kaminokoike Pond - Lake Mashu - Wakoto Peninsula - Lake Kussharo - Tsubetsu Pass - Lake Akan - Lake Onneto - Kushiro

Trip Overview

Although I have visited Japan previously, I had never personally organised a wildlife tour here and had no idea just how difficult it would prove to be. Indeed, having planned and guided trips all over the world, I can genuinely say that this was the hardest tour I have ever arranged, as the Japanese have almost no interest in overseas tourism and even less in communicating that specific fact to you. To be entirely honest, they have almost no interest in communicating anything to potential foreign guests and even when a particular tourist attraction or hotel does have a website, which will often not be the case, they are not usually accessible in English, even as a second or third language. This is fine in itself, as I have never expected everyone to automatically speak my language, but the majority of these companies also refuse to communicate by email, which means that you do not even have the opportunity to translate your request into Japanese for them and when you do finally find someone to speak to, they of course then only speak Japanese. Most accommodation can only be confirmed via one of numerous automated booking sites and it was frankly impossible to find anyone to even discuss wildlife with at almost every destination, let alone arrange a local guide who could actually help you search for anything.



As such, I spent longer trying to organise this tour than my four other 2023 trips combined and in several cases, I just had to accept defeat and either remove a destination from my itinerary or understand that it would just be a question of turning up there and hoping for the best, which I did on several occasions. The thing is, on each of those occasions, that is exactly what I got and if this tour was beginning to read as an utter nightmare due to its logistical complexities, the complete opposite was actually the case and ultimately we enjoyed the best of everything, including the wildlife. Although we did encounter issues, they almost all involved the rather challenging elements and to describe our expedition as a triumph, would not I think be overstating either our enjoyment of it or the level of success achieved, both in terms of what we saw and how well we were able to see it. The general mood was no doubt helped by the fact that my son James was able to join me, not only because he is my son and I love sharing everything with him, but because he is so good at what we do and everything becomes far easier with him at my side. In fact, given that his time assisting on these tours is now severely limited, I always ask him to accompany me on the one that I believe will be the most demanding each year, as I automatically know that I can rely on him even in the most challenging of conditions and that any difficult times, will be a lot more fun with James than without. I was particularly keen for him to join me on this tour, as he had never visited Japan previously and the Asiatic black bear that we were hoping to encounter on Honshu would be his final bear species, other than a giant panda, which I have also not yet seen in the wild. As it was, the entire tour turned into something of a bearathon, with bears turning up at the most unexpected of moments and often in the most unlikely of places, both on Honshu in terms of black bears and also on Hokkaido, where brown bears occur and can be viewed on land and from the sea. We would experience incredible success with them across every environment and our ocean voyages off the Shiretoko Peninsula would, as had been anticipated, prove to be an essential element of the tour. Much the same could be said of our nocturnal walks and drives, which we were relying on for the vast majority of the rare mammals we were hoping to see. For this tour I would be using a thermal imager, which I have resisted for a while, but knew would be necessary regarding some really scarce and difficult species at both destinations, including one or two that I was told I could basically forget seeing entirely. In one way, we were extremely fortunate that none of our cruises were disrupted by the inclement weather, as I was aware that July is one of the wettest months in Honshu and consequently expected some rain, although perhaps not quite as much as we eventually endured, but conversely, July is supposed to be relatively dry across much of Hokkaido and yet we experienced at least some precipitation on almost every day. Often it was torrential and even when it was not actually raining, the sky was usually overcast and the coast was routinely shrouded in dense fog. On Honshu one entire black bear trek was lost to the rain, as well as a spotlighting session at Kamikochi after a horrendous hike to and from Myojin Pond in relentless driving rain, which we should certainly have abandoned. Other activities were similarly rain affected, but this did not appear to have any significant impact



on our success and in some ways, the mist and fog was more damaging than the rain, as you cannot search for what you cannot see and we were not even able to see Mount Fuji clearly. The weather aside, which did at times cause a certain amount of misery, my only real difficulty was with the food, which I found to be largely inedible and almost unrecognisable as actual food. I know that I am in the minority here and that many visitors rave about Japanese cuisine, but even James struggled in places and he is generally far more adventurous than me. Clearly we were not spending a great deal of time in large cities, where menus would have hopefully been more varied and the actual food of a considerably higher quality than was usually served, but I even struggled in supermarkets and survived much of the trip on biscuits and bread products. The hotel buffets were by far the worst, as I attempted to find something that I could at least partially recognise among the generic and horrendously processed food sources, before settling on the bread rolls or perhaps rice if I was really fortunate. Thankfully, the food is pretty much irrelevant to me on tour and the Japanese people we met were some of the friendliest and most hospitable I have known. In fact, I found it extremely difficult to reconcile the warmth and kindness that we experienced, with the same people who support the abhorrence that is commercial whaling and who are capable of despatching a trapped deer by smashing its skull in with an iron bar or baseball bat, as anyone is allowed to snare and kill deer in Japan and in the absence of guns, they are usually bludgeoned to death in this barbaric manner. Obviously a huge number of other species are killed or injured in these snares, including bears, and not only does the Japanese government sanction this outrage by its citizens, it actively encourages it in order to control deer numbers. That said, we observed large numbers of locals out enjoying nature, all of whom appeared to take a positive interest in the wildlife encountered, including the various whales at Shiretoko. Similarly, we noticed just one dead animal on the road during our entire stay in Honshu, a small snake, which is the only time I have experienced almost no road kills in a built up industrialised country, certainly on a tour of this length. Hokkaido was much the same, with two more dead snakes and two crows, but just one mammal, a Japanese weasel, which is still exceptional when you consider the carnage that occurs on roads elsewhere in the world, particularly in my own country. This glaring and somewhat inexplicable contrast in terms of the way certain animals are treated, reminds me rather of the almost equally obvious contradiction in terms of the way foreigners are viewed before they arrive in Japan, when there is basically almost no help or even guidance available, to the enthusiasm and generosity they are eventually received with. Whilst the locals were unfailingly polite and helpful, and I believe genuinely so, this is the most insular society I have ever spent time in, certainly in terms of western democracies, and for someone who grew up in London, it was very strange to meet just one black person in more than three weeks. To me, this lack of diversity was as noticeable as the impeccable manners on display and I wondered at times which element was perhaps more important to the Japanese people. As it was, everyone was as friendly and helpful as I could have hoped for and this was arguably the most memorable tour I have been involved with in recent years. As always, I remain extremely grateful to the many individuals who helped to make it so special, particularly to James,

who had a bit of a slow start after a long absence, but was soon proving exactly why I always miss both his wonderful company and enormous practical assistance. I should also finally mention that the spellings of the place names are ultimately those that I have chosen, as I do not think that I have ever encountered so many variations of the same destinations and on several occasions, I have just used the version that I have come across more often.



Honshu

In all, we had thirteen nights on Honshu, which is the largest and most populated of the four main islands that make up Japan and includes the capital Tokyo, where we would begin. A large part of our tour would take place in the central mountainous region known as the Japanese Alps and our longest single stay would be at Karuizawa, which was the only destination at which I had been able to arrange guided activities. Although, as is always the case, we were keen to search for basically anything, our main mammal targets at Honshu were Asiatic black bear, considered to be difficult, Japanese serow, thought to be less so, and Japanese macaque, which are routinely encountered at more than one destination. Raccoon dogs were also high on our radar, as well as two endemic squirrels, Japanese giant flying squirrel and Japanese flying squirrel, neither of which occur on Hokkaido, and hopefully four of several mustelids found here, so Japanese weasel, Siberian weasel, Japanese marten and Japanese badger. Ideally we would have spent a great deal longer on Honshu, as there were several additional destinations that I would have liked to explore, not all of which were wildlife related. Probably the most obvious was Hiroshima, where American forces dropped the first ever atomic bomb in anger on the 6th of August 1945. A second atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki three days later would bring the Second World War to a close and both bombs are likely to have killed in the region of 200,000 civilians, although the exact number will never be known. I had included Hiroshima on my original itinerary, but it would have added another 400 kilometres and at least two additional nights, which I just did not have to spare. I will therefore include this historic and significant site to my next trip and will not need to return to most of the areas visited on this tour, although, as I hope this report will adequately illustrate, several were undoubtedly productive enough to warrant a second visit.

Not the Best of Starts

I have to admit that our trip did not begin entirely as planned, as our first night at Mount Takao was spent traipsing around the mountain temples in the rain and over the next two days we would basically fail to see Mount Fuji, which I would have said was impossible beforehand. Indeed, James and I have often joked that there must be easier occupations than searching for rare mammals, usually when we are in the middle of some godforsaken, desolate hellhole, and on several occasions we have suggested alternative options, including mountains, principally because they are rather large and tend to stay in one place. It never occurred to us that our almost incomparable ineptitude would stretch to one of the most famous mountains on the planet and that we would fail to find all 3,776 or so metres of Mount Fuji, hidden as it was in the mist. It is difficult to know what we can move on to next, but whilst we missed certainly the most iconic landmark in the country, we did begin to start finding the first of the animals we had been hoping to observe. Whilst there was the possibility of several exciting species there, our first night at Mount Takao was really lost to the weather, despite our best efforts to search in the rain. We did eventually spot the first of the myriad sika deer we would encounter across the trip, but it was a damp and rather gloomy beginning in truth. At Lake Ashi we should have been able to savour a first view of the iconic Mount Fuji, an active volcano and the tallest mountain in Japan. Due in part to its almost perfectly conical shape, and the fact that it stands imperiously alone and not as part of a larger range, Mount Fuji has become almost the cultural personification of the country and tourists flock from all over the world to gaze upon its snow-capped peak, which is best viewed in the spring before the snow melts and it takes on an altogether less impressive black hue. We consoled ourselves that it would have been black like this during our visit, but we will really never know, as the cloud descended and did not lift again during the two days or so of our stay. We did of course try several different locations, in the vicinity of both Lake Ashi and Lake Kawaguchi, and at one we had a tantalising glimpse through partially broken drifting clouds, but alas that would be as good as it got and we would eventually have to move on without paying homage to this national treasure. There was, however, a particularly bright silver lining among these darkest of clouds, as I purchased a new thermal imager specifically for this tour and the colder it got, the clearer the heat signature would appear of any animals caught in it, including those at significant distance. For once, the rain and correspondingly low temperatures were now going to play in our favour and what we were going to lose during the day, we would surely gain at night, when most of the creatures we were searching for were active. The anticipated benefits were immediately obvious at Lake Ashi, where we had no success with our spotlights, but I found a Japanese hare and Japanese giant flying squirrel within a few minutes of turning on the heat scope. Each of these rare mammals are endemic to all of Japan excluding Hokkaido and the flying Squirrel was observed a few hundred metres away as a tiny red pinprick high in a tree. We were eventually able to approach to the base of the tree undetected, at which point we turned on the spotlight to enjoy a fabulous view of this distinctive arboreal rodent. We also encountered a masked palm civet, an introduced species that does not occur naturally on any of the Japanese islands, but this small invasive carnivore was found wandering along the road by chance and not with the thermal. James had a brief roadside glimpse of another carnivore while I was driving towards yet another Mount Fuji viewpoint, from his description it was either a Japanese or Siberian weasel, and a hugely impressive golden eagle swooped barely metres above our car at Lake Kawaguchi. Events were clearly beginning to take a turn in our favour and if the weather did not exactly improve, at least now we were going to be able to take advantage of even the poorest of conditions.



A Shot in the Dark

Having turned our back once and for all on any chance of seeing Mount Fuji, a host of other mountains would come into play as we travelled north, one of which we intended to hike in order to search for a couple of species I had spent months attempting to arrange to see before we travelled. Japanese flying squirrel and Japanese dormouse, both of which can again be found across the entire country except Hokkaido, are known to occur at a small wooden hut on either Mount Ito or Iodake, depending on your preference. The flying squirrels live in the nearby forest and visit the hut to feed on the sunflower seeds that the owners leave out, whilst the dormice live inside the hut and tend to be seen in the evening when the oil lamps are lit. They advertise the hut as being the only place where you



can see both species on their website, but despite my best efforts and those of my Japanese friends, who phoned the people who own the accommodation on several occasions, no one would agree to meet me at the hut, which was not apparently open yet, even for a couple of hours. This would therefore be one of those occasions when we had to just turn up and see what the situation was on the ground, which involved several hours hiking and possibly a night on the mountain. Before then, we had to check into our pretty forested guesthouse at Tateshina, which was also well known for the mammals that visit each evening, as well as its superb food, which was indeed the best I tasted in the entire country. In addition to the Japanese squirrels that can be observed during the day, raccoon dogs, Japanese badgers and Japanese martens all visit the feeders at night here, although the raccoon dogs are the more regular dinner guests at this time of year. We would have the opportunity to watch a pair that have been coming here for eleven years apparently, which, if correct, is an extraordinary length of time for an animal that is not supposed to live much beyond six or seven in the wild. Although you are observing the animals behind glass, basically as you eat your own dinner, it is always a great joy to watch these sweet little canids, which occur naturally in Asia, as opposed to the invasive population that is currently spreading west across most of mainland Europe. We were not destined to see either the badger or the marten here at Tateshina, but there was a squirrel on a bird feeder on our arrival and we would encounter three in all, one in the surrounding forest and another on the feeders the next morning. Perhaps surprisingly, given the ideal habitat we would spend so much time exploring over the next eleven days, these were our only Japanese squirrel sightings on Honshu. We would also see our first red foxes here, which would become a regular feature of both sections of the tour, as well as several sika deer and another raccoon dog whilst spotlighting from the vehicle on that first evening. Our second would be spent on the side of a mountain and the next day we duly made our way to Mount Ito, to begin the long trek up to the mountain hut, which we were hoping would either now be officially open or at least accessible. The hike was fairly steep in places, but we made it in reasonable time, only to find that the hut was locked tight with metal shutters across the door and windows. There was no way to enter without damaging the property, which of course would have been a step too far, and none of the



other buildings in the area were occupied either, as I had been hoping that perhaps there might be a caretaker at the site. We therefore had the choice to either abandon the entire sorry affair or wait until it got dark in the hope that at least the flying squirrel might turn up, as the Japanese dormouse was now very unlikely. Having made so much effort and come so far, we both chose to wait and as we sat back against some rocks overlooking the hut, I prepared the thermal imager, in order not to disturb anything that might appear. I knew already that the hut was an Asian particolored bat roost and sure enough, just after dark, a steady stream of bats began spilling into the night sky. These were quickly followed on the ground by several small Japanese field mice, which I also knew could be encountered here and checked individually in the heat scope, just in case a dormouse had decided to join them. Whilst we concentrated most of our scanning on the adjacent forest, I had also noticed a nesting box on the side of the hut and wondered if it might be in use by a flying squirrel, as it was a slightly different colour to the rest of the wooden exterior and I thought perhaps that this might be due to the heat of an animal inside. As I swapped between the trees and the box, I noticed that there was suddenly a red shape at the entrance to the latter and realised that it was a flying squirrel with its head poking out. James and I took turns to watch it emerge and return on several occasions, until we eventually thought that it was relaxed enough to try some light with and perhaps attempt a few identification shots. As it was, this first squirrel was remarkably calm and I was able to approach within a few metres, as James held the light for me. A second squirrel would later emerge from the forest and James also flushed our first serow of the trip, when we went for a short walk to try to keep warm some distance from the hut. Although it was not the best view, I was able to pick up the animal again on the side of the forested mountain with the thermal and we were both able to clearly see one of our main target species with the spotlight. It was an unexpected bonus to say the least and just as we were considering exploring further before returning to the hut, the rain returned instead. We had considered spending the night here if necessary, but with the weather now intervening and given that there was so little chance of seeing a dormouse without accessing the hut, we decided that it did not make a great deal of sense lingering in the rain and began the long trek back to the car in the dark, spotlighting all the way down. It was approaching midnight by this stage and the descent, both on foot and then in the car, produced a third flying squirrel, which I picked up with the thermal imager whilst driving, and another serow, which was observed in more traditional fashion by James with a spotlight. As we drove out at the bottom a raccoon dog ran across the road in our headlights and we made it back to the guesthouse in the early hours, just in time for a couple of hours sleep before moving on. Whilst we had not had the opportunity to see a dormouse, we were both delighted that we had made the not inconsiderable effort to try the mountain hut just on the off chance and our determination had been rewarded with several excellent sightings, including three species that we would not see again on the trip and would have consequently missed entirely if we had decided not to stay after our long hike up. As I always like to say, the more I try, the luckier I get and our luck was just about to get a whole lot better.

The Bear Necessities

I had not booked any accommodation at Joshin'etsukogen National Park and when the receptionist asked us to come back in an hour, I almost asked if they could please try to be slightly quicker while we waited in the lobby, as it was already 4pm and 5pm is a fairly late check in, especially as we had been travelling all day. As it was, I decided at the last minute, *'When in Rome'* and suggested to James that we kill the hour by exploring the area ready for our night drive. We could have driven in several directions from the hotel car park, but I picked what looked to be a quiet forest lane and reminded James that we were now in bear country and that an Asiatic black bear could appear at any moment. Whilst I knew that to be the case, I obviously did not expect to just bump into one, but within less than five minutes, that is exactly what happened and a young black bear shuffled out of the forest maybe 30 metres from the car. If we had been able to check in on time or I had insisted we wait, we would have still been back at the hotel, but as it was, we were watching our main target for the entire tour and James had now seen every member of the bear family, with the exception of a giant panda. The bear itself looked like a reasonably large cub and we agreed that we would just sit tight and wait for mum to appear, as she was unlikely to be too far away. The logic was sound enough, but after either following the bear at distance or driving around the forest roads to get in front of it for almost an hour, we began to wonder if it may actually be on its own. At one point it trundled within a couple of metres of our parked car, but it paid us absolutely no attention and spent much of its time with its snout up sniffing the air, as if trying to find its mother. Although it did not look big enough at first, we wondered if it had reached the age whereby the mother has to scare her young off in order to mate again and when we returned to the hotel later, one of the staff confirmed that this is exactly what had recently occurred. The young bear had been seen on several occasions since and we would ultimately spend well over an hour watching this rather forlorn figure begin to make his own way in the world. We eventually decided that we should leave it alone and return to the hotel to at least drop our bags off, as it was still light and I was keen to see what else we could find on what would be our only afternoon and evening here. Another bear would be almost a miracle of course, but within perhaps ten minutes of leaving the hotel this time, I heard a loud rustling in the thick vegetation at the side of the road and just as I pulled over to investigate further, I caught sight of a smaller cub crossing the road in my rear view mirror and turned just in time to see it disappear into the forest. I could scarcely believe our luck, as I had basically been told to pretty much forget even the possibility of seeing a wild bear in this region and had now seen two within around 90 minutes of our arrival. Once again, it made sense to wait and see if mum was going to appear, but after several minutes, it looked as if she has already crossed and we continued to explore further along the same road. I never drive quickly looking for wildlife, or really even in wildlife areas, and on the way back I slowed down even more as I approached where the cub had emerged, just in case it was still in the vicinity, perhaps with its mother. I clearly never expected it to be and our chances of finding three wild Asiatic black bears on basically the same afternoon drive, must have been infinitesimally low, but the more you try the luckier you get, and there on the bend of the road, almost exactly where I had seen the cub, stood its mother. At least I take it that it was the mother, as it could have actually been a completely unrelated bear that just happened to be moving in the same direction, perhaps even heading towards the same food source somewhere. Whatever the case, she too crossed into the woods and we sat shaking our heads and smiling at how unbelievably fortunate we had been. Funnily enough, as it began to pour again later that evening just as we prepared to go out spotlighting, there were no comments from either of us regarding our terrible luck and the tour more or less continued in this triumphant manner throughout. Even on what turned out to be an atrocious evening, we enjoyed a nice view of a Japanese hare in our headlights, initially sitting at the edge of the road in typical upright fashion and then sprinting away as we approached. This was our second and final Japanese hare of the tour, but there were to be more bears, lots more bears.



Monkey Business

As we moved on the next morning, we encountered our first group of Japanese macaques, which were spread out along both sides of the road feeding and grooming calmly. I had known that we might observe these endemic primates here, as we were only driving a short distance south to the Jigokudani Monkey Park, which is part of Joshin'etsukogen National Park and is famous for the 'snow monkeys' that bathe in the hot springs during the freezing winters. These so-called snow monkeys, which are in fact Japanese macaques, are probably among the most celebrated primates on the planet and I have lost count of the photographs I have seen of



family groups relaxing in the small thermal pools, usually with heavy snow falling against a frozen backdrop. A number of documentaries have also been filmed here over the years, the better ones explaining that although the images of monkeys warming themselves against the harsh winter elements may appear idyllic, some macaques are clearly more equal than others, as these primates live within a strict, female dominated social structure, and only those of the higher echelons are permitted to access these often life preserving waters. What many people do not know, is that these monkeys visit the hot springs throughout the year and although this was apparently always the case, they are now fed, just to more or less guarantee their presence for visitors. Personally, I think that this is a shame, as it has transformed an entirely natural occurrence into at least a partly commercial venture and whilst most of the fascinating behaviour on display here remains unaffected, it is difficult to know exactly how often the macaques would visit in the absence of food. At least the amounts on offer appear to be reasonably limited and the monkeys remain fundamentally wild, returning as they do to the forest each evening, where at least some of them remain for several days regardless of the free meals. The social hierarchy appears to be slightly more relaxed in the warmer seasons, at least in terms of access to the pools, as there were very few squabbles among the large number of monkeys that had gathered during the morning of our visit. There must have been as many as 200 across the entire site, some of which were sitting high on the rocks overlooking the hot springs, while others foraged down by the river, well away from the actual pools. The social interaction was as absorbing as I always find, with mothers nursing their young and those same infants playing boisterously among themselves, but this was all behaviour that I am familiar with and for me, the activity around the hot springs was unquestionably the most enthralling element of our visit. How often can you say you have watched monkeys swimming purely for pleasure, as was apparently the case in terms of several individuals here, while others were clearly content to fully submerge themselves, as they dived down to the bottom for food. The entire experience was surreal in a way, as it was probably not quite as natural as it should have been, but somehow felt completely the opposite and we spent the morning in more or less rapt attention. As you might expect, our only fleeting break involved another mammal, when a female serow was spotted feeding on the side of an overlooking hill with her young fawn. We would see several more at our next destination, which I had arranged as the main wildlife section of our time on Honshu, principally because it had not proved possible to find another wildlife guiding company on the entire island.



Picchio Perfect

The one that I had found, the non profit organisation Picchio, were based around 100 kilometres south of Jigokudani at Karuizawa and I had organised six major activities with them, including two hikes for Asiatic black bears and one for serow, as well as two night safaris and the opportunity to visit one of their giant flying squirrel nest boxes. In addition, they had very kindly offered us the chance to join a bear patrol, as one of the main areas in which they work is human-bear conflict and every night their patrols monitor the whereabouts of collared black bears with the aid of radio telemetry. If bears are encroaching anywhere they should not be or that puts them at risk, specially trained bear dogs will be deployed with their handler in order to drive the bears back to the forested areas and out of danger. With the exception of these bear patrols, all our activities are available to standard tourists in some form or other, as I had arranged specially extended versions in as many cases as possible, in order to research their services and overall capabilities. If I



am honest, these extended activities were incredibly expensive, almost inappropriately so when you consider that I was attempting to put a mutually beneficial business relationship in place, but the five different individuals who assisted and guided us could not have been more helpful and I would certainly recommend their services on that basis alone, not to mention the significant conservation work they are currently involved in. As is often the case when dealing with wild creatures, the tours themselves were somewhat mixed, as neither of the bear hikes produced bears, although to be completely fair, the second was abandoned in its infancy due to the unrelenting rain. Instead, our Picchio guides took us to search for a collared female in another area, which we eventually found hiding high in a tree. The serow trek was an altogether different affair, as this took place in the most glorious weather imaginable and against the spectacular backdrop of Mount Asama, which is staggeringly beautiful. In fact, the elements had been so poor to this stage, I have neglected to mention the epic scenery we were encountering on a daily basis, especially the dramatic mountain landscapes. It is of course difficult to truly appreciate the panorama, when everything is constantly grey and obscured by cloud, but parts of Honshu are as beautiful as anywhere I have visited and the island was far less spoilt than I had been expecting. The hike was also helped in no small part by the fact that we were wildly successful, with four sightings in all, one of which was as close as I had been hoping for, both in terms of our first really good view of one of these fabulous goat antelopes and also regarding an accompanying photograph. I think we knew it was going to be a fairly good day even before we met our Picchio guides, as the sun was out as we drove towards the meeting point and we had already stopped for a stunning green pheasant, when I suddenly saw a small Japanese mole moving across the road from left to right. I screamed at James, who was on his phone, to look, as he had never seen a live mole and I knew that it was



one of his major wildlife ambitions. Fortunately, he looked up in time to see the mole continue its journey to the vegetation at the side of the road and although it was a difficult place to stop, on a bend going uphill, I parked quickly in the hope of getting a better view or even a photograph. As it was, the mole did not tarry and or could we, as the car was parked just too precariously to leave for more than a minute or so. No matter, as it was still a thrilling episode, particularly for James, and as I have written on several occasions regarding equally rare species, when you are finding moles without even looking, you know you are having a good tour. Having spotted the green pheasant on the drive to our meeting point, we ended what had been an amazing day with an equally striking copper pheasant on the drive back and later that evening we would encounter one of the animals that I was most hoping to see on this first section of the trip. We had four nights in all at Karuizawa and our nocturnal drives, two of which took place with Picchio, were perhaps what could best be described as a qualified success, as we did encounter several nocturnal species, two of which were new for the trip, but also missed a few for which I now really only had one remaining site. It was ever thus of course and the first new mammal was a wild boar, which I had expected to observe in far greater numbers than the four we would eventually come across here. I had fewer expectations regarding a Japanese badger, which I had been desperate to see and almost jumped out of a moving car for when I thought that I had spotted one on the road. I was not certain at first whether it was a badger or a marten, but when it practically shuffled over my feet to continue foraging, there was no mistaking the fact that we had found our first resplendent badger. It was an incredibly calm individual as well and appeared almost totally unconcerned by our presence, even when we followed it along the edge of the road, taking the occasional photograph whenever it looked up from its digging. We would see a second the next evening in a completely different area and our various nocturnal outings would ultimately produce two raccoon dogs, four masked palm civets and a fledgling Ural owl, as well as multiple red foxes and giant flying squirrels. The last civets and foxes were observed whilst out on bear patrol and although I was extremely grateful to have been given the opportunity to participate in what is a hugely important task, perhaps strangely, the most rewarding activity at Karuizawa was the giant flying squirrel encounter, which had a rather profound effect on both myself and James. With a camera set up in the nest box, we were able to watch the dedicated mother grooming her two adorable kits, before they took turns to emerge and then return, on several occasions in the case of the young. To be able to witness the entire family climbing up and then gliding off into the night, was an acutely humbling experience, especially as one of the two kits had never flown previously and the other only once. In addition to their amazing bear dogs, which we had the absolute pleasure of spending time with one afternoon, Picchio operate several conservation programmes within the Karuizawa area, including the installation of bear proof fencing within the local community, rescuing bears from snares and of course long-term educational projects, aimed at promoting the peaceful coexistence between people and bears. In 2019 they began offering eco tours in Shiretoko National Park on Hokkaido, where I was spotlighting more or less alongside them on this trip at times, and in 2021 they began a project to help protect the wildlife of Iriomote Island, which I am also planning to visit in order to locate an Iriomote cat, a critically endangered subspecies of the mainland leopard cat found only on this remote island. I eventually hope to be able to operate trips there as well and if you would like to support any of the important initiatives that Picchio are involved with, please visit their website at www.wildlife-picchio.com to learn more and to make a donation.

The Yin and the Yang

If I had to choose one stay to highlight the impact that the weather can have on a tour, I would pick our two days at Chubu Sangaku National Park and more specifically the breathtaking Kamikochi valley area, which you cannot drive directly to and have to instead park and travel in on a shuttle bus. Chubu Sangaku incorporates the northern area of the Japanese Alps and Kamikochi is particularly famous for its crystal clear ponds, ravishing autumn colours and scenic hiking, which we were hoping to experience on the first of our two days. On the second, I had planned a much longer trek in the Mount Sugoroku region, which was going to take around twelve hours and would probably present a final opportunity to see another black bear. That at least was the plan and at Kamikochi the hike would include all three of the main ponds along the Azusa River and would cover roughly between twelve and fifteen kilometres, depending on our exact route. One of our first stops would be Myojin Pond, which I knew from my research was likely to be the



scenic highlight of the day and perhaps even the trip. The entire area is visually exquisite, with ancient forests and mountains reflected in the shallow translucent waters and smaller rocks littering the tranquil pools like younger versions of their towering timeless forebears. If it sounds idyllic, it certainly should have been, but within maybe 30 seconds of settling down on the shuttle bus to enjoy the magnificent scenery on the way in, it started to spit with rain. It was significantly heavier as we arrived and by the time that we found the hiking trail and started walking, it was pouring. We continued of course, in the hope that it might miraculously relent, but it just got worse if anything and as we trudged our way back in what was by now a veritable deluge, I noticed a few Japanese macaques sheltering under some leaves in a tree just above our heads. They were all huddled together against the elements and every last one of these forlorn bedraggled beasts, looked exactly as I felt. The torrential rain continued into the evening and although we attempted to spotlight the mountain roads beyond Kamikochi, it was just too heavy to see anything, including the road, and we had to abandon. We would experience worse conditions just once on the trip, on Hokkaido, but on that occasion, we had no intention of stopping. Having



fallen asleep to what sounded like mountains being washed away, we awoke the next morning to a cloudless sky and bright sunshine, which meant that we now had to choose whether to stick to our original plan to hike the Mount Sugoroku trail or return to Kamikochi. It was a tough decision, as the longer hike was more likely to produce a final black bear sighting, but the enchanting pools of Kamikochi had been our original choice and although the weather was much improved, there was no guarantee it would last long enough for us to complete a full day hike. That last factor pretty much made up our minds and we decided to return to Kamikochi, for what turned out to be one of the nicest days of the tour, both in terms of the weather and location, which could certainly now be described as idyllic. Despite our understandable concerns, the weather did actually hold throughout and we spent the whole day under perfectly clear blue skies. Even the macaques were happy and I made a point of photographing a small group foraging in the forest and just lying out in the sunshine, like all of us really. We were aware that our time on Honshu was drawing to a close and that we were unlikely to see these endemic primates beyond today, as well as a few other species. Having reluctantly forsaken the longer hike, we thought that was probably already the case in terms of a black bear, but as we walked along a boardwalk in a swampy area of forest, I turned my head to the left, just in time to see a bear strolling serenely across a clearing and disappearing into the bushes. I doubt the entire event lasted more than five or six seconds and in that first instance I turned automatically to James, who had thankfully glanced left as I did. There were tourists just ahead who would continue their holiday oblivious to the fact they had been walking alongside a bear and tourists just behind, who might wonder why two foreigners had just stopped on the boardwalk, but who would equally never know how close they came to seeing a real live bear. Such are the vagaries of wildlife viewing, as we were not even meant to be at Kamikochi on this second day and had it not been for the soul-destroying weather of the previous day, we would never have seen this bear either. Of course, we might have encountered ten on the Mount Sugoroku hike, but that we would fortunately never know and it always makes sense to concentrate on the unexpected triumphs, rather than the hundreds of probable disasters. In this case, it was plainly just meant to be and we had now seen five of these rare black bears, which was fairly remarkable when you consider how scarce they are and that I had originally been advised I was searching in the wrong areas and that we would not find a single bear at the destinations we were visiting.

All Things Come To Those Who Wait...

There would be no bears at our final destination on Honshu, but Nara Park and the Kasugayama Primeval Forest would provide one last opportunity to search for two of the three small carnivores I was still hoping to see, as neither Japanese marten or Siberian weasel occur on Hokkaido, where we were due to fly following our two night stay. Japanese weasel is also occasionally observed, which can be found on Hokkaido, and at this late stage, I would have been overjoyed with the marten and either of the two weasels. The complex itself is a large sprawling combination of traditional public park, botanical gardens, natural forest, museums and, as you would no doubt imagine, several shrines. As such, we were not always certain where exactly we were allowed to be, which resulted in us being asked to leave a couple of areas at night. On one memorable occasion, as we were taking a short rest around midnight after several hours of walking, A tannoy announcement was made from one of the museum buildings, confirming that the museum was closed and that we needed to leave directly, which I am not certain has ever happened to me before. Obviously the locals know which areas remain accessible after dark, but there were no obvious signs, at least not in English and we basically searched everywhere until we

were asked to move on. It would have actually been sensible to have a third night here, as it is a large area to explore and we probably only covered around half of it, given the amount of time devoted to some superb sightings. During the day there are sika deer everywhere, but not much else and all of the excitement takes place at night. That said, we probably tried what turned out to be the worst area first and with just two red foxes to show for several hours of spotlighting, it was beginning to look as if we had wasted one of two precious evenings. That was until I picked up a heat signal with the thermal imager, that I was convinced was a Japanese marten. It was certainly the right size and shape, but we were so nervous of making a mistake and scaring it off, we followed it for several minutes before turning the spotlight on, at which point we were ecstatic to see that this was indeed a marten. It got even better, as there were actually two and over the next fifteen minutes, we followed either one or the other, depending on where exactly they



went and how relaxed they each were. Unfortunately, we had already been told that we had to leave this particular part of the complex before I spotted the marten and we therefore agreed to take a few more quick shots and depart. Although, as is so often the case in these magical situations, I would have liked to stay a little longer, we could not have been any closer or enjoyed a better view. We consequently departed in great spirits and determined that we would try a different area the next evening, specifically in the hope of finding one of the two weasel species to have eluded us so far. There are actually four weasels on Honshu, but we had encountered least weasels and stoats on numerous occasions, both of which are widespread in Europe, and as much as I adore both of these ferocious little mustelids, our real targets were Japanese weasel and Siberian weasel, which is widespread across much of Asia and has been introduced to Japan. I was particularly hoping to find the Japanese variety, as it is endemic to three of the main Japanese islands and has been introduced on the fourth, Hokkaido. We decided that our last night spotlighting on Honshu would include a combination of walking and driving and immediately it looked as if we had chosen a better area, when a red fox appeared after just a few minutes, quickly followed by a giant flying squirrel. We had been incredibly fortunate in terms of our views of these endearing animals across the trip and this would be no exception, with the squirrel climbing in and out of its nesting hole on several occasions, just a few metres from where we stood watching. It eventually scrambled up to the very top of the tree in typical fashion, but stopped to feed there as we decided to move on. A second squirrel would be observed in another tree and further success followed in the form of two Japanese badgers, the first of which was spotted shuffling along the edge of the forest, again within just a few metres of our lights and camera. By this late stage we decided we would try in the car, just to cover more ground with time now running out. There were two areas that I was still hoping to check and just as we reached the first, James screamed 'weasel', which I instantly picked up running along the road on the passenger side. It was clearly visible in the headlights and then again with the spotlight as we quickly abandoned the car, just in time to see it look back at us from a fallen tree and then run down the steep bank and away into the night. Given its size, not to mention the fact that it was active so late at night, it could have only been one of two species and I was able to identify it as a Japanese weasel by its relatively short tail to body size, as the Siberian weasel has a longer tail in relation to its body length. Unsurprisingly, given that it was already the early hours and we had to be at the airport by 7am to catch our flight to Hokkaido, this would be our last new sighting on Honshu and the first weasel for me, after James had a brief glimpse of one earlier in

the tour. It was also the one I had most wanted to see and we could scarcely believe that we had managed to find our two main targets over the last two nights. It was an unbelievable way to finish by any standards and just a few minutes later a masked palm civet ran across the road and disappeared into the forest, at which point we decided we should probably call it a night as well and get some sleep. The somewhat mixed weather aside, our time on Honshu had enormously exceeded expectations, both in terms of the number of different species encountered and the superb way in which they had generally been observed, not to mention the unforgettable hospitality we had experienced. We would now have an almost entirely new set of animals to search for, as only three of the nineteen mammals observed on Honshu, would be seen again on Hokkaido and instead of searching for black bears, we would now be hoping to see their far larger brown cousins.



HONSHU MAMMAL SIGHTINGS

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Red Fox*	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Observed at every location other than our first.
2	Raccoon Dog*	<i>Nyctereutes procyonoides</i>	Four at Tateshina, including a pair fed at our guesthouse, and two individuals at both Karuizawa and Chubu Sangaku National Park.
3	Asiatic Black Bear	<i>Ursus thibetanus</i>	Three at Joshin'etsukogen, including one for more than an hour and probably a mother and cub, as well as individuals at Karuizawa and Chubu Sangaku.
4	Japanese Weasel	<i>Mustela itatsi</i>	One at the side of the road at night at Nara Park.
5	Japanese Marten	<i>Martes melampus</i>	A pair for an extended period at night at Nara Park.
6	Masked Palm Civet	<i>Paguma larvata</i>	One at Lake Ashi, four at Karuizawa and one at Nara Park, all at night.
7	Japanese Badger	<i>Meles anakuma</i>	Two individuals on different nights at Karuizawa and two on the same night at Nara Park.

8	Sika Deer*	<i>Cervus nippon</i>	Encountered at every location except Chubu Sangaku National Park, including in large numbers at Nara Park.
9	Japanese Serow	<i>Capricornis crispus</i>	First encountered at Mount Ito and then observed at Jigokudani, Karuizawa and Chubu Sangaku.
10	Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Two individuals and one pair at Karuizawa and a small herd at Chubu Sangaku National Park.
11	Japanese Macaque	<i>Macaca fuscata</i>	A group of around 30 at the side of the road as we left Joshin'etsukogen, large numbers at Jigokudani and two small groups at Chubu Sangaku.
12	Japanese Hare	<i>Lepus brachyurus</i>	Two individuals, the first with the heat scope at Lake Ashi and the second from the car in heavy rain at Joshin'etsukogen National Park.
13	Japanese Squirrel	<i>Sciurus lis</i>	Three sightings around our accommodation at Tateshina.
14	Japanese Giant Flying Squirrel	<i>Petaurista leucogenys</i>	An individual at Lake Ashi, several at Karuizawa, including a mother and two young at their nesting box, and two individuals at Nara Park.
15	Japanese Flying Squirrel	<i>Pteromys momonga</i>	Three individuals at Mount Ito, two around the mountain hut and one on the drive out.
16	Small Japanese Mole	<i>Mogera imaizumii</i>	One running across the road in the early morning at Karuizawa.
17	Small Japanese Field Mouse	<i>Apodemus argenteus</i>	Several around the mountain hut and other buildings on Mount Ito.
18	Large Japanese Field Mouse	<i>Apodemus speciosus</i>	Several at the Karuizawa Wild Bird Forest.
19	Asian Particolored Bat	<i>Vespertilio sinensis</i>	A relatively large group leaving the hut at Mount Ito after dark.

* Observed at both Honshu and Hokkaido.

James observed an additional weasel near Lake Ashi, which, from his description, was either a Japanese or Siberian weasel.

For the purposes of this list, Nara Park includes the Kasugayama Primeval Forest.



Hokkaido

In contrast to our time on Honshu, we had a guide for the duration of our stay on Hokkaido, which with hindsight turned out to be almost entirely unnecessary. To be fair, I did think that this may be the case before we even flew to Hokkaido, as we had achieved most of our success beyond the actual guided activities on Honshu and I had quickly realised that serious wildlife watching is still in its infancy in Japan and that barely anyone will even understand why you are searching for anything much beyond the 'snow monkeys' of Jigokudani. Although clearly an experienced guide in the region, who did his best to be helpful beyond any actual wildlife viewing, this particular individual was entirely out of his depth on this kind of tour and had no real knowledge of how or where to search for even moderately rare species. He had even less idea in terms of the commitment often involved in the process, despite multiple emails between the manager of his company and an online meeting between the three of us to discuss our specific



requirements. As a hiking and activity guide, which I now understand is his main role, he may well have been ideal, but he had a little knowledge of the mammals of his own country, as he had interest in finding them, which was sadly apparent almost as soon as we met. On our very first day, when we were struggling to find a northern pika in the rain at Daisetsuzan National Park, I suggested that the three of us split up in order to cover more ground and to scan different areas. On the three occasions that I returned, to either check if our guide had been successful or to suggest moving on, he was on his phone twice and fast asleep once. Similarly, when we were scanning for seals and whales at the Cape Nosappu bird hide, he spent almost the entire afternoon on his phone and did not even look up when we were watching a rare minke whale. He did not lift the binoculars to scan the horizon once, not for our benefit or his own or even to see what we were watching. It was this blatant lack of enthusiasm that was the real issue, as it was difficult to entirely warm to someone who you could see had absolutely no interest in what you were doing or even what he was being paid to do. Ultimately, I ended up using him as a driver and translator and although his company had arranged all of our excursions and accommodation as efficiently as you would expect, which was undoubtedly convenient, his presence eventually became more of an expensive inconvenience than any great assistance. We gradually found ourselves spending more and more time searching on our own and although he was meant to accompany us on at least some of the nocturnal activities, I excused him after the very first night, much to his obvious relief it must be said, when it became clear that he was going to be even less use in the evening. I consequently took over all of the nocturnal driving and certainly we had a far better time when we no longer had to accommodate someone who evidently had no real understanding of what we were doing or any enthusiasm to help. Not that his almost entirely undisguised indifference had any real impact on our trip, as none of our activities were really dependent on his expertise or otherwise and my only real regret was that I hired a guide in the first place, as he did not even provide his own transport and I should have just used his company to organise the necessary logistics at a fraction of the cost. As it was, I was ultimately immensely relieved that I had to hire my own vehicle or we would have been entirely dependent on someone who simply did not want to be there and would have consequently spent far less time in the field, including almost none at night. We had nine nights on Hokkaido in all and most of our time would be devoted to whales and brown bears, both of which we had the opportunity to observe on foot and by boat. Whilst the weather did improve marginally, it still rained more or less every day and conditions here were probably worse than on Honshu,

certainly in terms of the visibility, as the mountains were often shrouded in dank low cloud and at times the dense sea fog would roll in and engulf the entire coast. That said, again the wildlife watching was not massively impacted, at least in terms of the variety of species encountered, if not the way that we were always able to observe them, as the conditions were at times challenging to say the least and a few of our excursions more resembled survival exercises than pleasant wildlife activities. James would no doubt insist that this has always been the case with my trips, but overall we had a fabulous time on Hokkaido, despite the poor weather and associated difficulties. If anything, the second largest and most northerly of the Japanese islands is even more picturesque than Honshu and the Shiretoko Peninsula, a wild and primeval strip of land extending into the Sea of Okhotsk, more or less instantly became one of my favourite destinations, not only in Japan, but anywhere.



Miracles Take a Little Longer

Our tour would begin at Lake Kanayama, principally because I know someone who encountered a Siberian flying squirrel just west of the actual lake, although in truth, these inanelly cute little scraps of fur, known locally as momonga, can be found anywhere on the island. I had set my heart on seeing one, partly because they are clearly a fantastic mammal and also because I had been informed they were impossible to encounter during the summer months and that your only hope is to trek miles out into the snow in the middle of winter, when you may just be lucky enough to catch one returning to its nest in the early morning. Even then, I was told that I would have maybe a 5% chance at best and one guide memorably informed me that it would take a miracle to see one unless I changed my



plans and visited during the winter, at which time of course, I would not have seen any of the bears. No one mentioned even using a light to search, let alone a thermal imager, which I thought may well prove to be the difference in terms of observing this rare squirrel, as it has already been regarding so many other species that were formerly considered virtually impossible to find. The initial plan was to explore the lake area during the afternoon and to mainly search on foot for the squirrel at night, in the first instance, along the road where it had been observed previously. I actually now believe that the forest in the vicinity of the lake would have been just as likely to produce a flying squirrel and we had immediate success there with several interesting species, including the ubiquitous sika deer, the almost equally prolific red fox, two raccoon dogs, which are always nice to see in the daylight like this, and a single mountain hare. Whilst I was not aware of it at the time, we had been incredibly fortunate with the hare, as this species only occurs on Hokkaido, at least in terms of Japan, and I had expected to see several during our stay, certainly considering the type of perfect habitat we would be spending so much time in. However, what started in the car and turned into an excellent close encounter on foot, would be our only view of this distinctive bunny, which was also the case regarding a number of other species I had thought would be reasonably easy to see. Whilst it is always a good sign that your luck is holding when you only find one of everything, the principle was evidently not that relevant to brown bears, which we stumbled upon almost at will, literally at one stage. On this our first evening, James spotted one walking along the side of a hill fairly close to the road and although we were not able to watch it for that long, we would see plenty more. As it was, we had considerably smaller and furrer fish to fry and after less than two hours scanning on foot, I found the Siberian flying squirrel that I had been told was impossible. As I had anticipated, the thermal scope was the game changer and although it proved extremely difficult to photograph, disappearing whenever we swapped from the thermal to the spotlight, I was eventually able to take a few basic reference shots. We would see two more flying squirrels throughout the tour, one that James picked up with the spotlight and another with the heat scope, but we more or less stopped looking and I am fairly certain that these hitherto elusive mammals are far more common and easier to find than most people imagined. It was still relatively early when we decided to head back, as our guide was clearly shattered and would not be joining us again after dark, but we did still have time to enjoy a great view of a fledgling Oriental scops-owl, as well as the company of a gorgeous red fox cub, which approached directly as we sat down to wait for the flying squirrel to reappear and had almost certainly been fed.

If At First You Don't Succeed

Ostensibly, our main target the next day was going to be a great deal easier to find than the flying squirrel, as I had been advised that we had a very high chance of encountering a northern pika at a specific area of Daisetsuzan National Park, where it should also be possible to see Siberian chipmunk and perhaps a Eurasian red squirrel. That was the suggestion in any case and the morning had consequently been devoted to the pika, with hikes arranged in the afternoon for the other animals. It all sounded reasonable enough and we set out at 6.30am for the drive to Daisetsuzan, at which point it was dry but overcast. As we arrived, the first spots were hitting the windscreen and we spent the next ten and a half hours or so traipsing up and down hills in the pouring rain in order to try to cover three possible pika sites, two of which we could barely see through the mist at times. If our guide had not realised what he had signed up for before the day began, which was pretty obviously the case, by the end of it, he was acutely aware of what it can sometimes take to find an animal and sadly, it was probably at this point that we lost his interest. Thankfully, James was still focused and at 6.20pm, so almost exactly twelve hours after we left our accommodation, he spotted a lone pika sitting on a rock. It was approaching dusk and getting dark by this stage, although in truth it had been dull and dreary all day, which made it difficult to take any really nice shots, not that either of us cared, as our perseverance had paid off more and we were overjoyed just to see a pika after searching for so long in such awful conditions. In the process, we had missed all of our other hikes and did at one point consider cancelling the spotlighting that evening. However, we again made the effort and this time were rewarded with a close view of a pair of raccoon dogs and an even closer view of another Siberian flying squirrel, which was located with the spotlight this time and was far more relaxed than the one from the previous evening. It basically sat on a low branch at the side of the road and after a few minutes and a succession of shots, we decided that it had been obliging enough and moved on.



If You Go Down To The Woods Today...

Given that we had surrendered so much of the park to our pika exertions the previous day, I was pleased that we had the opportunity to at least explore a second area of Daisetsuzan, as I had arranged a trek to search for brown bears in the Mount Hakuun area of the park. I have to admit, that I was originally reluctant to book this activity, as you are only allowed to begin the hike, which includes the obligatory bear safety presentation, from 7am and have to be back out by no later than 3pm, which seems totally ridiculous to me. Certainly, when you consider how much more active bears are in the morning, when you cannot reach them, and the late afternoon, when you basically have to leave them. Therein lies the problem, as in some ways, the hikes are more designed not to see bears or at least to see them only in strictly controlled conditions and at great distance, as you are not allowed to go any further when you reach a certain point and have to stop and scan for bears moving across the side of the mountain. Although you can walk on your own, when you reach either of two viewing points at the top, you are immediately joined by park rangers, presumably to ensure that you do not go any further. For someone who has spent so much time with wild bears all over the world, including walking among dozens in the remote Alaskan wilderness, the entire experience was utterly surreal and at one stage I said to James that I hope we bump into a bear on the hike back down, just to see one more naturally. As it was, the nonsensical regulations were even worse than I, or my guide for that matter, were aware, as you are not permitted to stay at either of the two final bear viewing areas beyond 12.30pm, despite the fact

that the hike down takes less than an hour. If I had known, I would have almost certainly decided not to proceed, as we would have only around three hours to search for bears, and at considerable distance, and when we arrived, the side of the mountain was covered in a thick veil of cloud. Mercifully, the cloud came and went throughout our vigil, blowing away for a few minutes to open a brief window, only to close again and restrict visibility to perhaps 30 or 40 metres. Eventually, James spotted a mother and two cubs on the horizon whilst scanning, which we watched in binoculars for the ten minutes or so that we had remaining of our time. When we reluctantly dragged ourselves away, the one consolation was that we were not hiking with either a guide or tourists wearing bells, as there is nothing more annoying than a tourist actually scaring the animals away that you are trying so hard to find, simply because they have no idea how to act if they do happen to encounter something. I never join groups wearing bells, or accept my guides wearing them, which has been really important on more occasions than I can remember and was again here, as I turned a corner on a boardwalk around halfway down and found myself staring directly at a brown bear. It was no more than five metres away and I am not certain which of us was more surprised, but it was the bear who ceded the path and ambled back up the hill and into the bushes. Although relatively brief, perhaps no more than twenty seconds, the sighting was one of the great ones and you know that you have experienced something memorable, when your heart is still racing several minutes later. It turned out to be a day for bears, as we had an extended view of another at the side of the road on the drive to Lake Oketo, where we were due to overnight before travelling to hopefully yet more of these adorable creatures on the Shiretoko Peninsula.



A Brief Interlude

Having lost a couple of hikes to the weather at Daisetsuzan National Park, and consequently at least two mammals we had been hoping for there, we made a brief detour from Lake Oketo to the Komaba Kinohiroba Park in Abashiri, where both of these species are known to occur. I was informed that the Eurasian red squirrel, basically the same animal that exists in my own country and across so much of Europe and Asia, would be a formality here, but that a Siberian chipmunk would be a matter of chance. In a way, I was surprised even at that chance, as Komaba Kinohiroba is at sea level overlooking the Pacific Ocean, whereas these small distinctive rodents are often found at higher altitudes. At least on this occasion though the advice was accurate, as we encountered squirrels within minutes of accessing the park and even found a few locals feeding them in places. The chipmunks though were clearly not as common and eventually I was relieved to find just one, which we spent about fifteen minutes following at a discreet distance and photographing. I would have been even more relieved if I had known at this stage that we would not encounter this creature at the one guaranteed destination I had reserved for them, as apparently they were fed there, which has been stopped and they are consequently no longer seen. We only discovered this after actually visiting the site in question and ultimately, if we had not seen this lone



chipmunk at Abashiri, we would have not seen it at all. The park itself looked to be another good location for Siberian flying squirrel and sure enough, we eventually came across a sign confirming their presence. On another occasion we would have checked at night, but this had only been a brief stop, albeit a hugely successful one, and it was now time to move on to what I had always intended as the main focus of our stay on Hokkaido, the Shiretoko Peninsula, which I had read so much about over the years and have been desperate to visit.



The Land That Time Forgot

We had the best part of four days and three nights at Shiretoko, one at Utoro on the western coast of the peninsula and two at Rausu, on the opposite eastern side. The nocturnal drives aside, our stay was largely centred around five boat trips, two for brown bears, which are watched along the coast here, and three for whales, which I will describe separately. There would also be the opportunity to visit a hide for the incredibly strange looking blakiston's fish-owl, which I heard someone once refer to as a small bear with feathers randomly glued to it, and I had arranged a few hikes, partly to search for wildlife and also just to explore further, as most of the peninsula is not accessible by car. Having waited so long to visit Shiretoko, I was somewhat reassured that it was as impressive as I had always imagined, as this is brooding primordial land and you would not be surprised if Kong suddenly leapt from the



impenetrable jungle or Godzilla himself appeared out of the sea fog and waded ashore. To continue the cinematic theme, the fenced area on the drive along the western coast actually reminded me of Jurassic Park and although the beasts behind the wire here were somewhat smaller, out to sea they would certainly be comparable. While all three of the whale tours would depart from Rausu, I had arranged bear tours on each side of the peninsula, with the first scheduled for the afternoon of our arrival at Utoro. The first thing I noticed from the boat, is just how rugged and dramatic the coastline is, particularly when partially cloaked in fog. You really do feel as if you have drifted into another world and although I have always loved searching for bears on foot, there is a real drama in finding them on such a remote and untamed landscape. On this first effort we encountered a mother and her cub from the previous year, as well as a large male strolling along the beach, although both encounters took place in shallow rocky areas, where we were not able to get as close as we would have liked. Whales and dolphins are also possible on the west coast, but we only spotted the two porpoise species that occur here, dall's and harbour, which are distinguished by their fin colour, as dall's have a white or white-tipped dorsal fin, while the fin of the harbour porpoise is entirely black. There are actually two subspecies of dall's porpoise, *Phocoenoides dalli dalli* and *Phocoenoides dalli truei*, or true's porpoise, which is the one found here in the Sea of Okhotsk. The Japanese still kill thousands of dall's porpoises each year for their meat and many thousands more die as by-catch in fishing nets. Our second bear tour took place from the small fishing village of Aidomari on the east coast, about 23 kilometres north of Rausu, and having arranged the first for the afternoon, I ensured that our last formal bear activity would take place in the morning. I am not sure if the fact that it was more successful was as a result of the early start, or because the old fisherman who took us out knew this stretch of coast like the curve of his wife's back, but whatever the reason, perhaps even good old fashioned luck, we saw four individual bears in all and two of them were much closer. One was a 400 or so kilogram male, that was clearly intent on putting on a little more weight, given the huge dead sea lion that it was guarding jealously at the water's edge. Another bear walked by at one stage and although it showed some passing interest in the possibility of a free meal, it thought better of it as soon as 'bearzilla' looked up, no doubt wisely. Our final bear was observed foraging on the beach, on both the journey up the coast and back, and on the return trip she was closer to the shoreline and we spent longer with her, watching her knocking rocks about like empty tin cans as she searched for food and even going for a refreshing swim just in front of our boat. There was still the possibility that we could see more bears, but if not, this was a lovely relaxed way to end, as the bears here simply take no notice of the boats and you can enjoy a full range of natural behaviour, without having to even consider the fact that you might disturb them. That was supposedly not the case with our next creature, the blakiston's fish-owl, as you are meant to arrive at the hide just before dusk and not leave until the last of any owls have departed, in

order to avoid any possibility of scaring them away. The hide itself overlooks an artificial pond and apparently the owls have been visiting for an easy fish supper for years. That said, I am not sure how likely it would have been to disturb the gloriously inept individual that showed up during our watch, as its method of hunting, obviously refined over millennia, appeared to more or less consist of falling out of the tree on to one of the confined fish and hopefully crushing it to death. Even in the restricted space of the small pond, it spent what seemed like an age stomping and splashing around before it finally managed to locate a fish and fly off to feed. I think that even I might have been able to grab one more efficiently and we did consider that perhaps this had just been an



isolated and misjudged incident, until the owl returned and repeated the entire inept process. We later agreed, that the blackiston's fish-owl automatically qualified for our silliest animal top ten, not least because it has a permanently perplexed look on its face, as if it knows exactly how silly it is. This was the only evening when we did not do a great deal of spotlighting, but there was not a massive amount of nocturnal activity on the peninsula in any case and we were really only seeing red foxes and sika deer each evening. The hope was for a sable, another marten that occurs on Hokkaido and nowhere else in Japan, but these small carnivores are notoriously elusive and are generally observed more in the winter, when many tourists actually prefer to visit Shiretoko, largely for its fabulous birdlife. The main attraction is the pack ice that builds up around the coast, where it is possible to observe hundreds of steller's sea eagles and white-tailed eagles, feeding and resting on the floating chunks of ice. Crowds gather on large cruise ships to glimpse these magnificent raptors out at sea and tours to walk across the drift ice are also popular, particularly with the locals. Another renowned winter spectacle is the elegant courtship ritual of the red-crowned crane, which mate for life and can be observed dancing together in a synchronised and enthralling display. People visit from across the globe to observe this mesmerising and intimate duet, with each bird throwing their head back and calling to each other in unison. Although the condition of the winter pack ice has become rather unpredictable in these ominous days of global warming, mid to late February is considered to be the optimum time to visit if this drift ice is the main focus of your trip. However, if that specific element is not as relevant, you can actually avoid many of the crowds by planning your stay towards the end of March, when you will still be able to observe all of the same species. All three of the aforementioned birds occur in the region in both March and April, indeed, we encountered multiple white-tailed eagles and red-crowned cranes on our visit in July, and at that time of year it is also possible to see northern fur seals, steller sea lions, ribbon seals and spotted or larga seals, not to mention, that pesky sable. I definitely intend to return, probably in both winter and summer, as our hikes were too short and we barely scratched the surface in terms of the interior. I did belatedly try to add the jaw-dropping trek to Mount Rausu, which we viewed from the almost equally spectacular Shiretoko Pass between Utoro and Rausu, but we just did not have time and when I return, there are several trails that I would like to try, some of which will take me into the very heart of this lost world. They range from a few hours to two full days and they can all apparently be enjoyed without any restrictions, so no guides, no time constraints and no bells, just bears and the forgotten landscape they have roamed for centuries.



A Whale of a Time

Although the weather had not been particularly kind throughout our tour, at Shiretoko we were extremely fortunate, as our stay coincided with calm seas and all five of our bear and whale tours went ahead, as well as a sixth general wildlife cruise a couple of days later out of Cape Ochiishi. If this sounds somewhat less than remarkable, you need to understand that in April 2022, a whale watching boat from Utoro sank, killing all 26 passengers and crew. The investigation concluded that the sea was far too rough to risk a passenger trip and that the inexperienced captain set out against the advice of the other operators in the area, none of whom sailed that day. Since that disaster, tours can only depart in benign conditions and a colleague of mine had three of his five cruises cancelled just three weeks before we arrived, including both of his bear tours. He subsequently failed to see a bear at all and I had been greatly concerned that we might suffer a similar fate. As it was, the fog was our real issue and at times it was not even possible to make out the towering sea cliffs of the peninsula, especially on the tours that departed in the early morning. Thankfully it always cleared and all of our boat tours here were outstanding in one way or another. Our three whale tours, all of which took place along Shiretoko's eastern coastline, were especially memorable, either in terms of the quality or number of sightings and sometimes both. We had actually seen a whale before we even set foot on a boat, as I took us to the coastal viewing deck at Kujiranomieruoka Park for lunch as soon as we arrived in Rausu and as we sat and ate our sandwiches, we scanned the Nemuro Strait, which separates the Shiretoko Peninsula from Kunashir Island. Kunashir is part of the Kuril Islands, which have been governed by Russia since they invaded and took control of the archipelago towards the end of the Second World War. Japan disputes the ownership of several of the southern islands in this chain, including Kunashir, which, at its closest point, lies less than 20 kilometres from the Japanese mainland. The whale tours all take place along the strait and you are probably just as likely to spot a whale from the wooden observation platform at Kujiranomieruoka, as we did within about five minutes of our arrival. To be fair, we were given a great deal of help, as some locals had been watching a sperm whale at distance for the previous couple of hours and they directed us where to look. At first we could only make out the distinctive spout from its blowhole, but as it dived, it partially raised itself above the waterline and we were able to enjoy a much clearer view. It was still not an exceptional one by any means, but it was certainly a wonderful start and within less than two hours, we would be watching possibly the same sperm whale, just a few metres from our boat. I have to admit, I had initially been in two minds about whale watching during our stay, and even about visiting the country in the first place, after the government announced in 2021 that Japan was leaving the International Whaling Commission and intended to resume commercial whaling. They



have since butchered hundreds of whales, 137 minke, 187 bryde's and 25 sei whales in 2022 alone, and that number was increased to 379 across the same three species for 2023. There are apparently plans to add additional larger species, despite the fact that the Japanese whaling industry receives millions of dollars in government subsidies every year and would not survive without this artificial and frankly inexcusable support. There can be no defence for this type of obscenity in this day and age and justifying crimes as part of your culture and tradition is no longer acceptable, regardless of your beliefs or practices. Slavery was part of western culture for centuries, as was the rape of women during marriage and legal sex with what would be considered children today, but these obvious outrages are quite rightly no longer tolerated and our more enlightened views should apply equally to wildlife. I am often



unsure whether to visit countries that engage in these atrocities, but the reality is, there are very few that do not in some way and in general, I choose to encourage wildlife tourism, as ultimately commercial factors will usually prevail and it is therefore essential that we prove to both local and international communities, that these animals are worth far more alive than dead. That is the stance I decided upon in terms of visiting Japan and I was delighted to see so many locals crowded onto the whale watching boats and how thrilled they all were whenever a whale was spotted. In many ways, our three whale tours were fairly dissimilar, which ultimately provided us with a superb overall picture of the possibilities here and almost a full set of species, at least in terms of regular visitors to these waters. Except for Pacific white-sided dolphins, which are normally common off the peninsula in July and August, we encountered everything that I expected, including the first of numerous white-tailed eagles on our initial voyage and several pods of dall's porpoise. Although we saw only two in all, this first excursion produced by far the best sperm whale sightings, as we spent much of the cruise with a large male that surfaced and dived within a few metres of the boat on several riveting occasions. Short of it breaching, this was just about the optimum view of the largest of all toothed whales and while we would see many more, none would quite match the majesty of this first encounter. Having already observed sperm whales this well, and human nature being what it is, James and I were both desperately hoping to see killer whales on one of the two remaining voyages, as the Nemuro Strait is famous for these iconic wolves of the sea, but we had been informed they had not been in the area for a few days. Certainly, the second voyage did not look promising when it began in thick fog, but then a rumour began to spread around the boat that a killer whale had been seen and you could hear the ripples of excitement begin to rise, as people either saw gliding shadows in the fog or guessed they had. Everyone of course experiences and recollects these events in their own unique way and for me, I can still see the erect dorsal fin of a huge male orca slipping out of the mist, before disappearing again in almost the same heartbeat. For all I knew, that could have been it, but as it was, gradually, and thankfully, the fog began to disperse and a pod of at least fifteen killer whales emerged from the gloom. What followed was as dramatic an experience with these supreme ocean assassins as I can remember, with the entire group, which included two tiny calves, swimming around the boat for more than 90 minutes, often in that terrifying and characteristic formation, with multiple dorsal fins lined up in a single menacing row. Long after I returned home, this would remain my abiding memory of our trip and when we discussed our adventure several months later, James said exactly the same. At the time, we also wondered exactly how our last whale tour was going to possibly live up to either of the first two and although it did not quite manage it, it did come reasonably close, as we had spent time with both sperm and killer whales, but we had not seen a humpback whale or witnessed the spellbinding sight of a whale breaching, both of which were rectified on this final outing. In addition to a glut of sperm whale sightings, we lost count somewhere between twelve and fifteen, as well as a final small pod of dall's porpoise, our only humpback whale encounter initially involved an individual breaching at distance. As we approached, we could see that it was a mother with her calf and I remember thinking to myself, I hope that pod of orcas is a long way away. Whilst she did not breach again while we were particularly close, we could have no complaints in terms of any of our activities at Shiretoko and although we did not realise it at the time, the end of our whale watching tours, did not mean the end of our whales.



A Day (and Night) to Remember

Almost inevitably, the drive away from Shiretoko, initially to explore the Notsuke Peninsula and then on to Lake Furen for the night, was ostensibly less eventful, although it still included multiple sika deer, red foxes and white-tailed eagles, our first red-crowned cranes, as well as a final Siberian flying squirrel on a late night walk. There were not actually that many species we had not now seen, and if you take the elusive sable out of the equation, our last remaining major target was a sea otter, which I had included a morning boat tour out of Cape Ochiishi in the hope of finding. Advertised as a nature cruise, in reality this is a bird watching tour with the possibility of a few interesting mammals, including sea otters and harbour seals, both of which I knew were likely, but not guaranteed. As it was, and as so often occurs when things begin well, this turned out to be a really fabulous day and easily rivalled any at Shiretoko, both in terms of success and enjoyment. The cruise was certainly helped by the fact that, in the naturalist and author Mark Brazil, we probably had the best guide in the country with us, or at least the most knowledgeable in terms of the wildlife and



natural history of both Japan and Hokkaido. It is difficult to explain just what a difference an experienced and enthusiastic guide can make to a tour and for me Mark's presence was in a way almost bittersweet, as he was initially due to guide our entire trip, but was eventually not able to dedicate the time necessary due to other commitments. He had joined the wildlife cruise as another guest, but over the course of our morning together, I was able to gather an insightful glimpse into what our tour might have looked like if Mark had been able to accompany us as originally planned. As it was, he was able to convey our interest in mammals to the captain and crew, as all of the other passengers were birders and ordinarily not much time is devoted to anything other than rare seabirds on this trip. Over the years Mark has published a number of insightful and informative bird and nature guides and my own particular favourite is *'Japan: The Natural History Of An Asian Archipelago'*, which was first released in 2022 and is, in my opinion at least, one of the most impressive and comprehensive publications of its kind. I would not have recognised half the birds encountered without his assistance either and among my personal favourites were tufted and horned puffins, black-footed albatross, red-faced cormorant and the white-tailed eagles observed high on the cliffs of the two islands we visited, first of all for harbour seals and then sea otters. At the mid 18th century, the sea otter population was estimated to number up to 300,000, but within approximately 150 years they had been hunted to the brink of extinction for their luxurious pelts. When they were eventually afforded protection by the International Fur Seal Treaty of 1911, there were believed to be between 1,000 and 2,000 remaining in small isolated pockets across their former range and even now the low numbers observed on the east coast of Hokkaido since the 1970s, are not considered to constitute a stable population. As Henry James Snow, himself a hunter of sea otters for both profit and so-called sport, wrote in his 1910 volume, *'In Forbidden Seas'*...

'The fur of the sea-otter being much in demand, the animal was hunted so relentlessly and indiscriminately that in many districts it was completely wiped out.'



Twelve in all were counted during our voyage, not all of which we observed, including a mother carrying her pup in traditional fashion on her stomach and a rather inquisitive male, that approached to within a short distance of the boat. Given that we were not guaranteed to even find a sea otter, the tour had already greatly exceeded our expectations and in addition to small groups of harbour seals, one of the trip guides spotted two harbour porpoise on the journey back. With two new species to show for the day already, we decided to try the bird hide by the lighthouse at Cape Nosappu, which is the most easterly point of Japan and affords a sweeping panorama out across the ocean. Mark had confirmed that this is an excellent spot for a number of cetaceans and James and I both spotted minke whales, although we were scanning in different directions and were never entirely sure if it was the same whale or whether we were watching two, as we never actually saw it or them at the same time. We also noticed what appeared to be a spotted or larga seal, but it was following a fishing boat along the coast and we had to abandon the hide and follow in the car, just to get close enough to be certain. This is known as a fairly reliable site for this pinniped and at a considerably closer range, we were able to distinguish the dog-like snout of a spotted seal in our binoculars. We would have liked to spend even longer at the bird hide, as you would no doubt pick up a great deal if you spend maybe even just a full day there, but we had to move on to Cape Kiritappu, where we hoped to watch more sea otters from the cliffs and needed to arrive before dark. We did make it, but the weather got there first sadly and although we did manage to see another six sea otters bobbing about in the waves below, we got absolutely drenched in the process. At this point, and as the rain was clearly too severe to even contemplate spotlighting, James and I devised an ingenious plan that would involve us driving 65 kilometres back to Nemuro, so a 130 kilometre round trip, for a curry. After days of surviving on bread rolls, pistachio cookies and dried fruit, it was absolute genius and as we set out in the worst storm of the tour, possibly the century, we justified our irrefutable idiocy on the grounds that we could always spotlight on the way back, by when the rain would have almost certainly relented. Visibility was more or less nil within the first fifteen minutes and at times I was only able to see by the forked lightning that began to illuminate the sky with increasing regularity. At one stage, I was fairly certain that I glimpsed the Four Horsemen riding us down, but as the driving rain increased and our wipers were rendered obsolete, I followed the directions on my phone towards the butter chicken and garlic naan bread I had been dreaming of more or less since we landed in Tokyo. James had already planned his full order and we both agreed that if it was closed for any reason, we would have to ask the chef to open his kitchen as a special favour to two weary travellers, perhaps with a gun to his head. When we arrived it did look as if our worst fears might have been realised, as the building looked more like someone's home and there were no obvious signs indicating a plethora of tasty Indian treats. The rain was still so heavy that when we entered the restaurant, the cook/waiter/owner, must have thought we had parked 200 metres down the road, instead of where I had illegally left the car exactly opposite to hopefully avoid drowning. I thought

at first that he was going to say they were closed, as the place was completely deserted, just as you would imagine on an apocalyptic night like this really, but he took pity on us and proceeded to serve one of the best meals either of us have had the pleasure risking our lives for. It all immediately made total sense and in our defence, the rain actually did stop on the way back and, quite remarkably, we were able to spotlight. Furthermore, we actually found a few animals that had not been swept away, including a rather bedraggled but still intact raccoon dog and what turned out to be our fifth new species of the day and last of the tour, a northern red-backed vole. The only other possibility here is a grey red-backed vole, but they are fairly easy to distinguish between if you are able to see the tail, as the northern variety has virtually no tail to speak of, whereas its grey cousin has a conspicuously longer appendage.

A Sense of an Ending

Our last two days would be spent exploring the national parks of Kushiro Shitsugen, where we were mainly hiking, and Akan Mashu, which more involved driving to various scenic viewing points before we departed for the airport and our evening flight home. Both parks are extremely attractive, the views over several lakes at Akan Mashu are particularly inspiring, and both produced some nice final surprises, including our last glimpse of a raccoon dog, a first pair of red-crowned cranes with a chick and salmon leaping upriver to spawn. Indeed, if the itinerary had been reversed and we had visited these parks first, we would have no doubt been enthusing over the epic landscapes of each, but we had accomplished much to this point and while the skies remained leaden and the rain persisted,



there was a sense that our tour was reaching a natural conclusion. One of the highlights of Akan Mashu is Kaminokoike Pond, a dazzling transparent pool fed by an underground spring, the waters of which are more or less universally described as being sapphire-blue. From the photographs I had seen, it is a fair description and there is something almost mystical about this small pond, where the constant low temperature perfectly preserves the submerged fallen trees, somehow adding to the otherworldly effect. Kaminokoike was the first destination I included when I decided to visit Akan Mashu and although it retained its own rugged beauty in the rain and the damp, it was one soggy landscape too far in terms of not being able to fully appreciate a setting I had set my heart on seeing in all its glory. The weather goes with the territory of course and in many ways we had been supremely fortunate, but we had equally missed some of the major highlights of certain destinations that I was not sure I would ever return to. With so many places still to see across the globe, it is difficult to justify returning somewhere simply for a better view and I would need to basically repeat this entire trip in order to observe everything as I would have liked. I will definitely revisit the Shiretoko Peninsula and there are many other parts of this enchanting archipelago that I would like to discover and search for a wide range of rare and fascinating wildlife. On my immediate radar are the remote southern islands of Iriomote for the endemic Iriomote cat, a subspecies of the mainland leopard cat, and Amami for the Amami rabbit, an unusual looking rabbit that only occurs on Amami Oshima and the smaller nearby island Tokuno-Shima. Both destinations can be combined with Okinawa, which lies between the two and is famous for its humpback whale migration between late December and the end of March, and humpbacks are just one of a number of cetaceans that can be encountered off the Ogasawara Islands, some 1,300 kilometres further east. Somewhat closer lies Cape Ashizuri, a headland on the extreme southern tip of Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four main islands. Ashizuri is another good whale watching spot, where bryde's whales are the main attraction among several species observed there. Further inland, I had tried to include a Japanese giant salamander stay during our time on Honshu, as there are a number of locations where it is possible to observe these incredible river

dragons now and I initially intended to try the Mount Daisen region of Tottori. Sadly, I did not have sufficient time to travel that far west, but I have always wanted to see one of these strange creatures and will add this stop when I return to Honshu to visit Hiroshima, which lies about 220 kilometres southwest of this sacred mountain. There are many other alluring landscapes and absorbing destinations that I hope to explore across Japan, certainly too many to include here, and if they prove to be anywhere near as rewarding as those of this tour, I can see myself spending a lot of time here over the next few years. This may have been the most difficult tour to organise, but it was probably one of the easiest to navigate and enjoy, thanks in no small part to the hospitality and kindness of the Japanese people...if you could now please just do something about your weather.



HOKKAIDO MAMMAL SIGHTINGS

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Red Fox*	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Routinely observed at every destination.
2	Raccoon Dog*	<i>Nyctereutes procyonoides</i>	Two at Lake Kanayama, a pair at Daisetsuzan National Park, one at Lake Oketo, one near Cape Kiritappu and a final individual at Kushiro Shitsugen National Park.
3	Brown Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>	Thirteen in all, across ten sightings and five different locations.
4	Sea Otter	<i>Enhydra lutris</i>	Up to twelve on a boat tour out of Cape Ochiishi and six and three on consecutive days from the cliffs at Cape Kiritappu.
5	Sika Deer*	<i>Cervus nippon</i>	Abundant and observed at every major location.
6	Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>	Close view of a solitary animal at Lake Kanayama.
7	Northern Pika	<i>Ochotona hyperborea</i>	A single animal sitting on rocks at Daisetsuzan National Park and others heard at the same destination.
8	Eurasian Red Squirrel	<i>Sciurus vulgaris</i>	Several in a forest park overlooking the Pacific Ocean at Abashiri.
9	Siberian Flying Squirrel	<i>Pteromys volans</i>	One at Lake Kanayama, one at Daisetsuzan National Park and a final individual in the Nemuro area.
10	Siberian Chipmunk	<i>Eutamias sibiricus</i>	An individual in the forest park at Abashiri.
11	Northern Red-backed Vole ¹	<i>Clethrionomys rutilus</i>	A single animal walking across the road at night in the Cape Kiritappu area.
12	Spotted Seal	<i>Phoca largha</i>	An individual animal first observed from the Cape Nosappu bird hide, with a closer view along the coast.

13	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	Two small groups at an island off Cape Ochiishi.
14	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	Two or three on the first bear tour from Utori and two at distance on the Cape Ochiishi boat tour.
15	Dall's Porpoise	<i>Phocoenoides dalli</i>	Observed in relatively large numbers on the first bear tour and on two of the three whale tours from Rausu.
16	Common Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>	Five views of either one or two whales from the bird hide at Cape Nosappu.
17	Humpback Whale	<i>Megaptera novaeangliae</i>	A mother and a calf on the third whale tour out of Rausu.
18	Killer Whale	<i>Orcinus orca</i>	A pod of around fifteen whales for approximately 90 minutes on the second whale tour from Rausu.
19	Sperm Whale	<i>Physeter macrocephalus</i>	One observed at distance from the lookout point at Kujiranomieruoka Park and between one and twelve encountered on all three whale tours out of Rausu.

* Observed at both Honshu and Hokkaido.

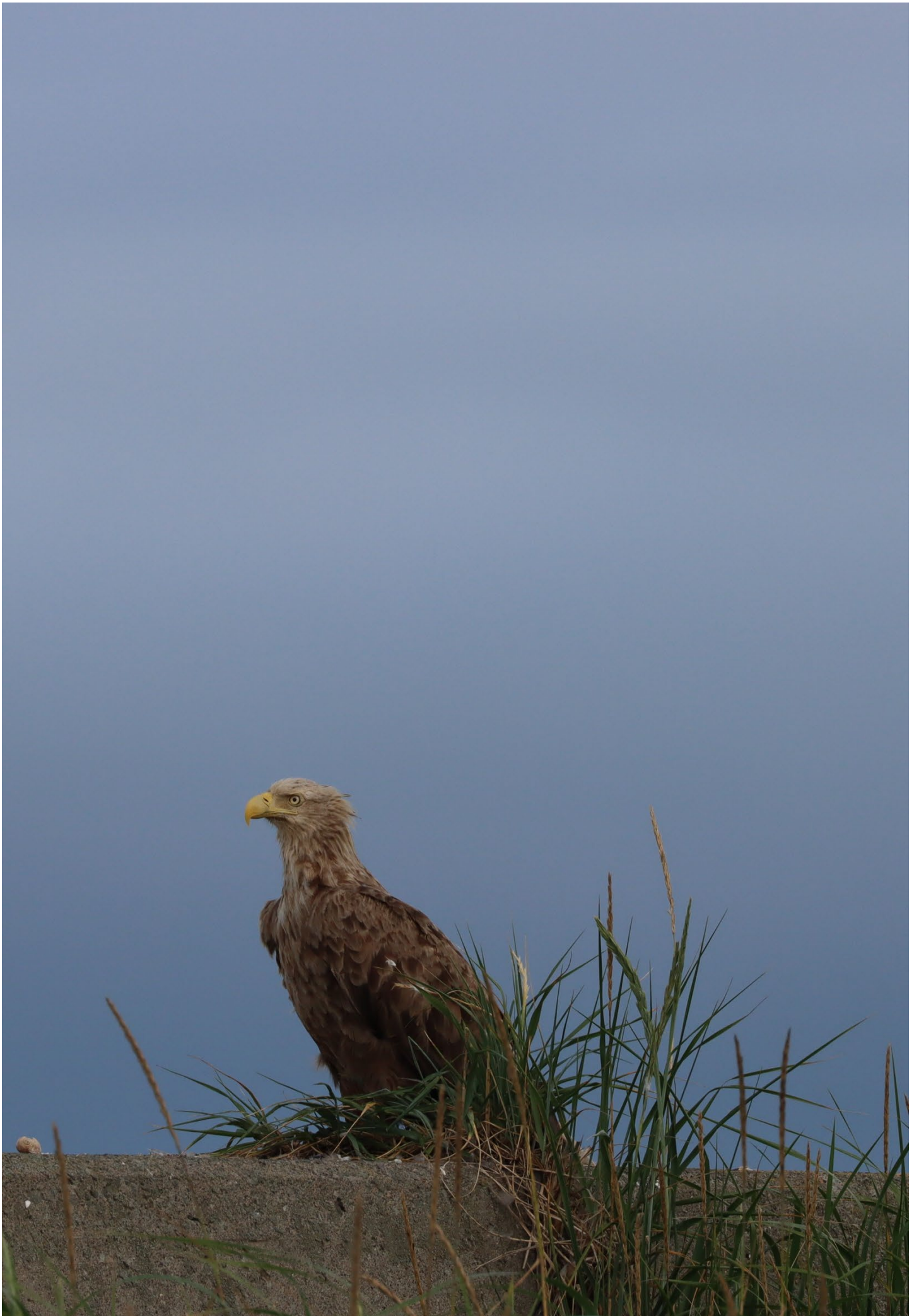
¹ There is a slight possibility that this species was a grey red-backed vole, *craseomys rufocanus*, but its tail was barely visible, whereas the grey variety has a fairly conspicuous tail in relation to its body size.

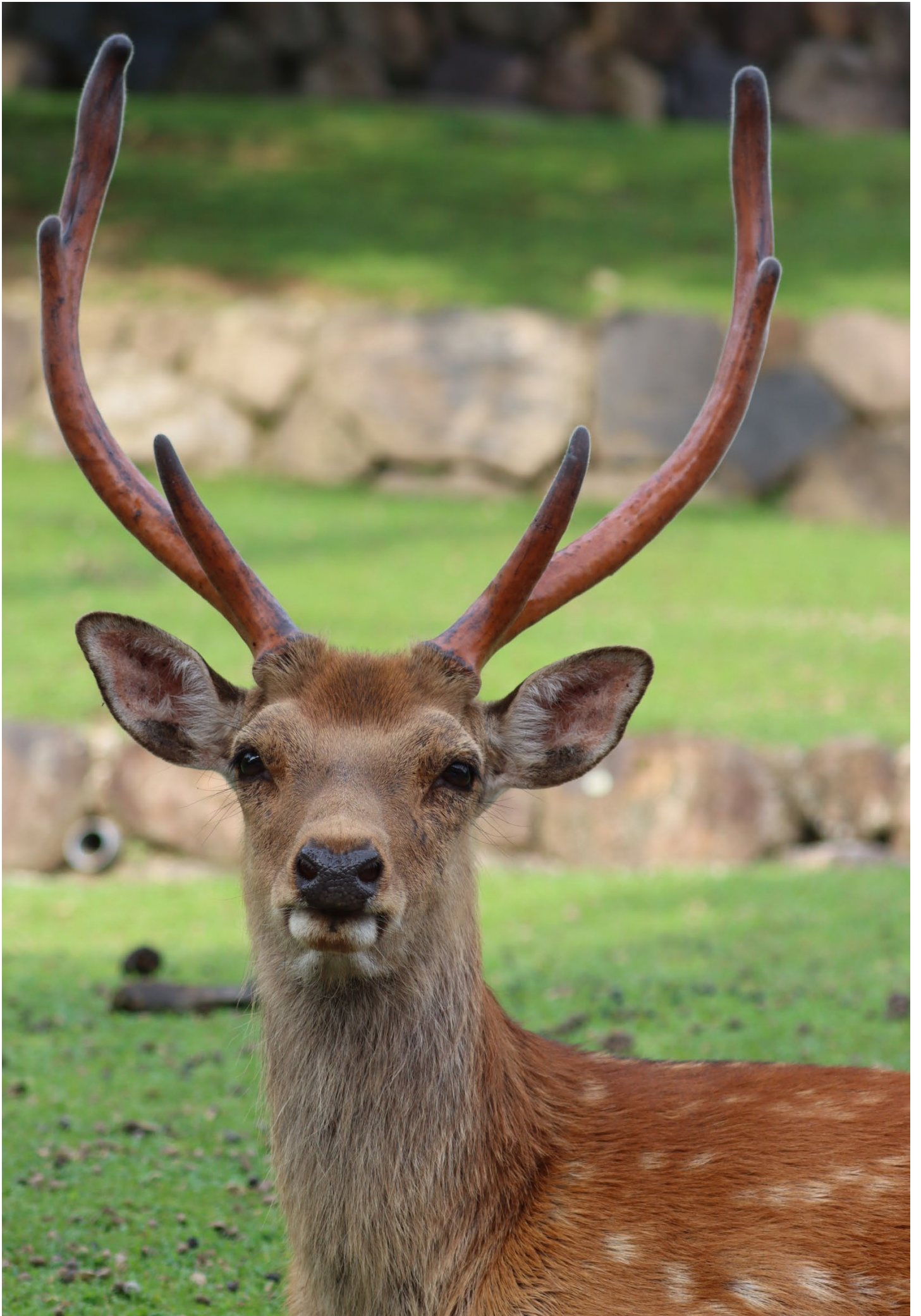
An additional species was observed swimming at Kushiro Shitsugen National Park, which was almost certainly an American mink, but was too far away to confirm.















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