

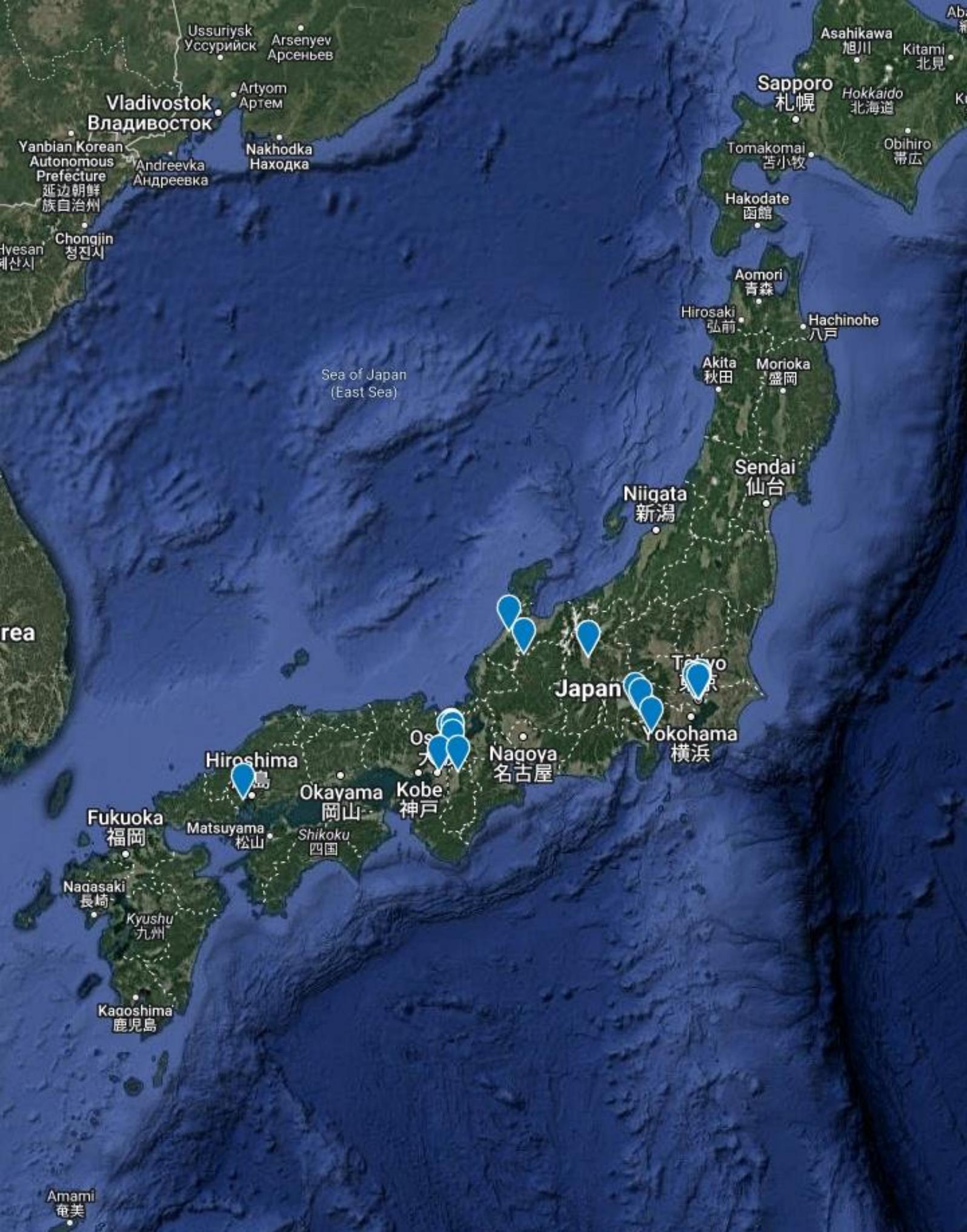
A Birding Trip to

# Japan

(Central Honshu)



22<sup>nd</sup> October to 4<sup>th</sup> November, 2024



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This trip was primarily a sightseeing endeavour, focused on seeing Japan for the first time in the central Honshu area. As such, we decided on a group tour (of 35), which was largely based in the cities (Tokyo, Mishima, Matsumoto, Kanazawa, Kyoto, Hiroshima, and Osaka), and visited many of the usual types of sites, such as shrines, castles, etc. All the cities visited are large, densely populated, and have small varying oases available for birding potential. Hence the amount of bird species was very low, with individual species numbers being high in only a few cases – eg Eurasian Tree Sparrow, Carrion Crow, and Brown-eared Bulbul.



Flights to Tokyo and from Osaka via London Heathrow were by Emirates airlines, with the 2 legs of the journey being around 7 hours (UK – Dubai) and 10 hours (Dubai – Japan). Internal transport was by coach arranged by our tour company, Newmarket Holidays, or Bullet Train to access Hiroshima. Hotels were all central to the cities, with surroundings generally of concrete high rise, apart from Tokyo which was located on Ariake Island in the bay. While some habitat with potential was found, such as at the castles which were surrounded by small tracts of woodland and moats, it was surprising that there were not more early thrushes etc.

## Tokyo



The first 2 days of our trip were based in Tokyo, and with it being by and large a bit of a concrete jungle, the amount of birding on a tourist trip somewhat limited. Also, the first of the 2 days was being bussed around some of the more popular sites, most of which were in the more heavily visited areas, although some hope had been gleaned for the Jingu Shrine, since it is set in a heavily wooded enclave of the vast city. However, it gave forth plenty of squeaking Brown-eared Bulbuls and bass-toned Large-billed Crows, but didn't seem to offer much else.

*Brown-eared Bulbul*



*Large-billed Crow*



A walk from our hotel in the Ariake district of the bay to a wonderful oasis at Hamarikyu Gardens was a breath of fresh air. This had once been set aside as a duck hunting slot for some of the wealthier inhabitants of the city, but now has been set aside and pristinely kept as a tranquil oasis for visitors to find a bit of peace and relaxation. The sound of the traffic just outside and views of overlooking skyscrapers perhaps enhances this feeling. The beautifully wooded paths and trails intersecting small lakes and ponds is a decent habitat for a small selection of birds at this time of year, set alongside one of the many fingers of the bay, which also feeds and takes from the briny lakelets. The hour long walk from our hotel to the site crossed the aforementioned bay a number of times, and proffered a few Gulls, mainly Black-headed, but also some Black-tailed & a single Vega



A 2-hour stroll around the gardens not only found the predictable and numerous Large-billed Crows and Brown-eared Bulbuls, but also a number of Eastern Spot-billed Ducks on and alongside the waters. In amongst these was a single Mallard, with a quartet of Common Pochard keeping their own company in front of the raised Tea Rooms. Passerines were in surprisingly low numbers, apart from a couple of gatherings of Eurasian Tree Sparrows, although a pair of Cinereous Tits and a trio of White-cheeked Starlings were found. Cormorants were regular, but the hoped for Japanese remained hoped for – all were Great. White Wagtails, all looking like the Eastern race *lugens*, were infrequently feeding alongside the pools. Herons – Grey and also Little & Great White Egrets – were also in small numbers.

*White Wagtail*



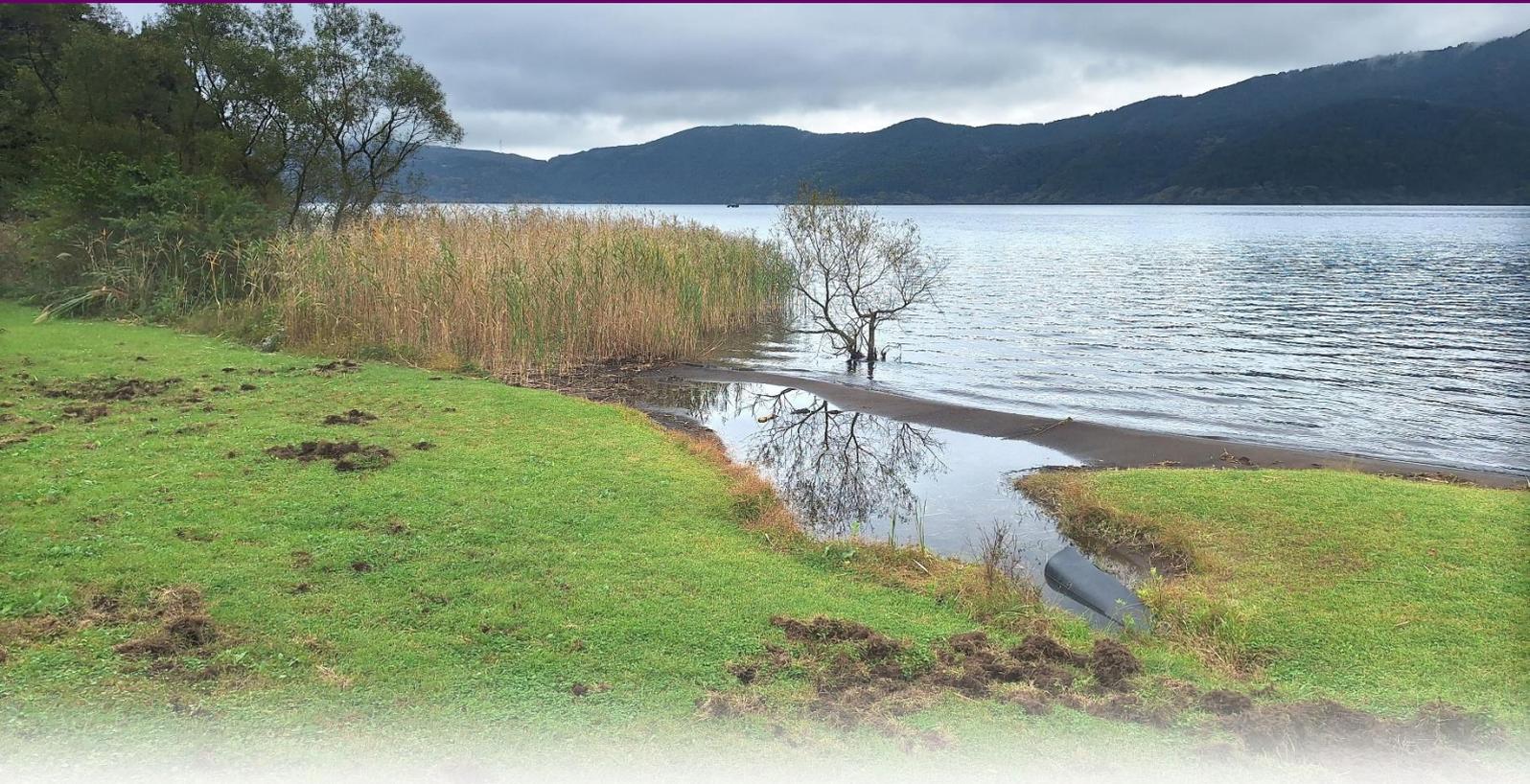
*Eastern Spot-billed Duck*



*Black-tailed Gull*



## Hakone



Leaving the maelstrom that is Tokyo was a breath of fresh air in more ways than one. After a couple of hours of regular bumper to bumper motorway snail's pace, we headed towards the mountains. Hakone is a town set not too far from Mount Fuji, a major draw for the tourist routes, and to be fair, would have been nice to see – if it weren't for the low cloud cum mist that was present at just the wrong altitude! The cable car (aka Ropeway) ascended into very low visibility, and only cleared as we descended in the coach again to the boat dock. Waiting for this was rewarding, since after a pastry lunch and stealing quarter of an hour's sniffing around the area the rewards proffered were a couple of Japanese Wagtails on the lake shoreline (along with single White Wagtail) and a single Grey-headed Greenfinch. Black(-eared) Kites were regular alongside Large-billed Crows. The boat trip along part of Lake Ashi was pleasant although rather birdless apart from a few more Kites and Great Cormorants. The last stop from here was at the Hakone Shrine, another good potential spot set in the forest, although in the short time we had there, the only addition was a few long tailed passerines overhead calling similar to waxwings which defied positive ID.

*Japanese Wagtail*



## Oshino

After leaving Tokyo and subsequently a night in Mishima, we headed for the central mountains, with 2 nights in Matsumoto. A tourist sidenote – the hotel we stayed at for the one night in Mishima – the Fujisan Tokyu – had most rooms facing in the direction of Mount Fuji. This hallowed volcano, much sought after by all (!), apparently is only visible on 1 out of 3 days due to low cloud. The morning we stayed we had excellent, if not sunny, views from our own room, which had not been possible the previous day. Just saying! The first stop en route was at Oshino, which is the location of some natural cold springs from aforementioned volcano. It has predictably now been turned into a sterile tourist magnet, with all the unfortunate trimmings. The initial walk along the rather pleasant stream is a lure before the throng. Also, the few initial species were very familiar to the British birder – Tree Sparrow, Carrion Crow, Eurasian Wigeon and Long-tailed Tit. A trio of Grey-headed Greenfinches broke this trend, with the only other bird of note, found by wandering a little way from the tat shops, was an impressive Bull-headed Shrike (*below*). Worth the visit!



A close-up photograph of a Hummingbird Hawk Moth hovering near a pink flower. The moth has a long proboscis and is positioned as if about to feed. The background is a soft, out-of-focus pinkish-white.

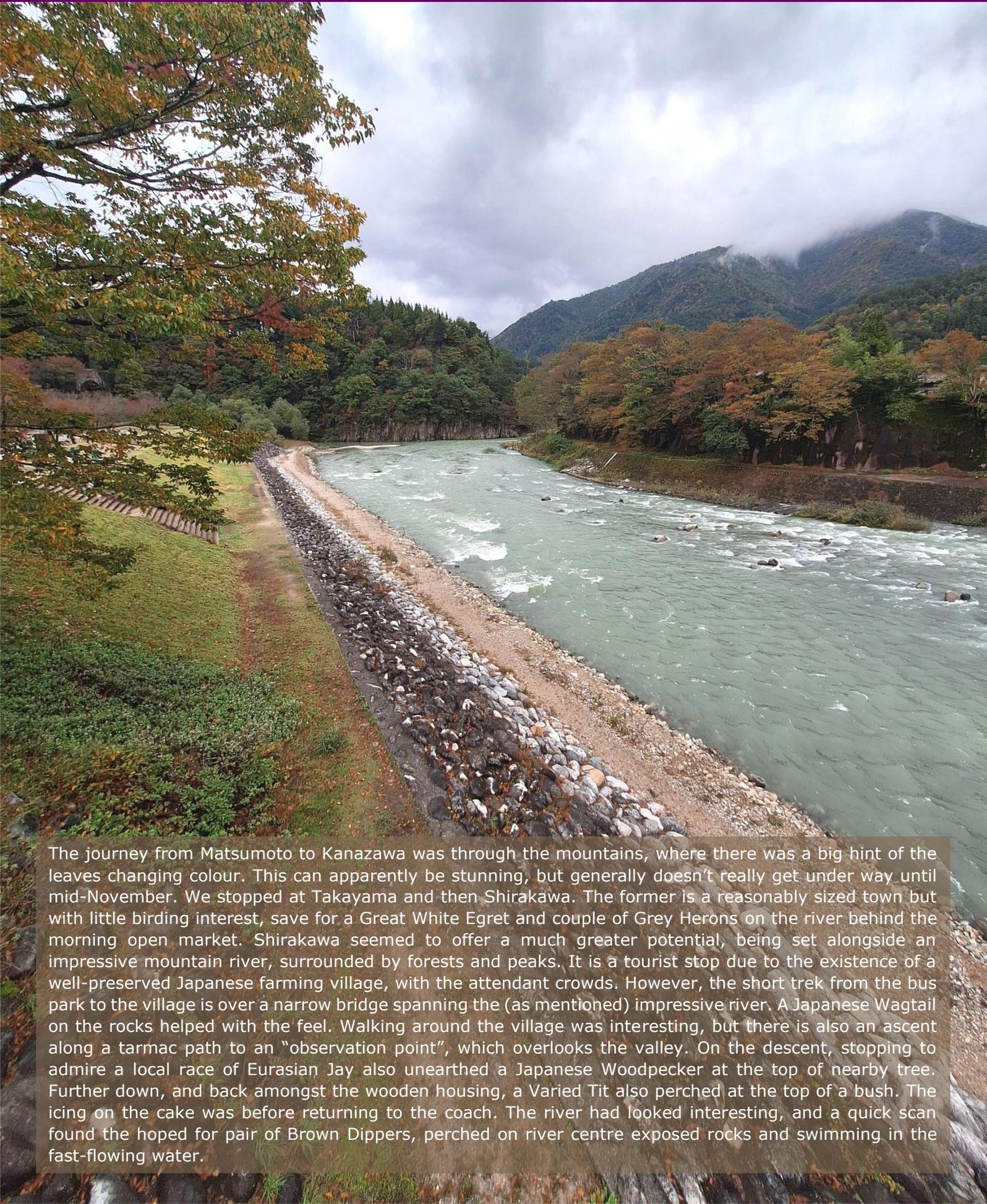
## Lake Kawaguchi

*Hummingbird Hawk Moth*

A similar story occurred at this site, with the interesting bird appearing just before departure. The promise of gardens along the lake front and 2 hours to take this in seemed too good to be true. Of course, the reality was shoulder to shoulder people, and the “gardens” a strip of manicured flowerbeds straddling a boardwalk. This handed a bird platter of again Eurasian Tree Sparrows, with the odd Black Kite soaring over, and regular Carrion Crows. The wildfowl on the lapping waters was in the form of Mallard, although a pair of Eastern Spot-billed Ducks did put in an appearance. A walk further along from the gardens, leaving the tourists behind, was a lot quieter, and offered much higher potential. This was rewarded with a male Daurian Redstart as the last bird to be seen before being whisked away on the coach again.



## Shirakawa



The journey from Matsumoto to Kanazawa was through the mountains, where there was a big hint of the leaves changing colour. This can apparently be stunning, but generally doesn't really get under way until mid-November. We stopped at Takayama and then Shirakawa. The former is a reasonably sized town but with little birding interest, save for a Great White Egret and couple of Grey Herons on the river behind the morning open market. Shirakawa seemed to offer a much greater potential, being set alongside an impressive mountain river, surrounded by forests and peaks. It is a tourist stop due to the existence of a well-preserved Japanese farming village, with the attendant crowds. However, the short trek from the bus park to the village is over a narrow bridge spanning the (as mentioned) impressive river. A Japanese Wagtail on the rocks helped with the feel. Walking around the village was interesting, but there is also an ascent along a tarmac path to an "observation point", which overlooks the valley. On the descent, stopping to admire a local race of Eurasian Jay also unearthed a Japanese Woodpecker at the top of nearby tree. Further down, and back amongst the wooden housing, a Varied Tit also perched at the top of a bush. The icing on the cake was before returning to the coach. The river had looked interesting, and a quick scan found the hoped for pair of Brown Dippers, perched on river centre exposed rocks and swimming in the fast-flowing water.



*Japanese Green Woodpecker*



*Brown Dipper*

## Kyoto



The first full day in Kyoto was spent in five locations, ferried around on the tour coach. All but the last, a trudge around Gion district, were at 3 temple cum castle sites, and the first a bamboo forest. The latter, as per usual, was amongst a throng of tourists, and perhaps potentially could have unearthed a few interesting species. A superb view of the river below was to be had from one of the observation points in the walk, but nothing was added to the running list. Most birds were on the river lower down next to a bridge crossing, but only consisted of the usual Wigeon and Eastern Spot-billed Duck, Little & Great Egrets, Great Cormorant, and Japanese & White Wagtails.

A little extra interest was to be had at the following 2 temple sites – Ryoanji & Kinkaku-ji on the outskirts of Kyoto. The latter was probably one of the busiest tourist spots so far, although to be fair the gold leaf covered temple was a little bit stunning. At the end of the walk, the trees above the exit were host to a small feeding flock of Tits (Cinereous, Varied & Long-tailed) and the first Warbling White-eyes. The former, a much smaller temple with some covered gardens, also held some brief Cinereous & Varied Tits.

## Nara Park



*Varied Tit*

This location has been featured on many a Japan travel programme and seems to be more famous for its wandering Sika Deer than the large temple hosting a bronze Buddha. They are predictably a tame deer, since in their wisdom the Japanese encourage feeding with purchased crackers, and some are more than a little persistent in their begging. They obviously aren't aware of the lessons from feeding Gulls in the UK! Much optimism was to be had when the location of the park, which is where the masses of tourists gather, is seen to adjoin the Mount Kasuga Primaeval Forest, which is presumably the origin of the Sika Deer. However, any birdlife is restricted to the usual Carrion Crows, Brown-eared Bulbuls, and Tree Sparrows, although a couple of Daurian Redstarts were picked out early on, including an elusive fellow in the grounds of the temple. Also here were a handful of Varied & Cinereous Tits, and a trio of Grey-headed Greenfinches. An accipiter overhead, again directly above the temple, was difficult to specifically identify. Perversely, the best new birds were a small group of Grey-headed Lapwings seen flying from the coach on the return to Kyoto, disturbed by a raptor.



*Warbling White-eye*

## LIST OF SPECIES

### BIRDS

#### Mute Swan

*Cygnus olor*

**27 Oct** Matsumoto, Nagano (1)

#### Northern Shoveler

*Spatula clypeata*

**3 Nov** Osaka (2)

#### Eurasian Wigeon

*Mareca penelope*

**26 Oct** Oshino (2)

**30 Oct** Arashiyama Bamboo Forest, Kyoto (16); Ryoanji Temple, Kyoto (4)

**3 Nov** Osaka (~100)

#### Eastern Spot-billed Duck

*Anas zonorhyncha*

**24 Oct** Hamarikyu Gardens, Tokyo (40)

**26 Oct** Lake Kawaguchi (2)

**27 Oct** Matsumoto, Nagano (20)

**30 Oct** Arashiyama Bamboo Forest, Kyoto (8)

**1 Nov** Miyajima, Hiroshima (2)

**3 Nov** Osaka (3)

#### Mallard

*Anas platyrhynchos*

**24 Oct** Hamarikyu Gardens, Tokyo (1)

**26 Oct** Oshino (12); Lake Kawaguchi (15)

**30 Oct** Arashiyama Bamboo Forest, Kyoto (4); Ryoanji Temple, Kyoto (6)

**3 Nov** Osaka (4)

#### Common Pochard

*Aythya ferina*

**24 Oct** Hamarikyu Gardens, Tokyo (4)

#### Tufted Duck

*Aythya fuligula*

**3 Nov** Osaka (6)

#### Oriental Turtle Dove

*Streptopelia orientalis*

**24 Oct** Hamarikyu Gardens, Tokyo (2)

**27 Oct** Matsumoto, Nagano (2)

**3 Nov** Osaka (2)

#### Eurasian Coot

*Fulica atra*

**3 Nov** Osaka (6)

#### Little Grebe

*Tachybaptus ruficollis*

**30 Oct** Nijo Castle, Kyoto (1)

#### Grey-headed Lapwing

*Vanellus cinereus*

**31 Oct** Outer Kyoto (5 see from coach returning to Kyoto, disturbed by raptor)

#### Black-headed Gull

*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

**24 Oct** Ariake District, Tokyo (12)

#### Black-tailed Gull

*Larus crassirostris*

**23 Oct** Sumida Park, Tokyo (3)

**24 Oct** Ariake District, Tokyo (3)

#### Vega Gull

*Larus vegae*

**24 Oct** Ariake District, Tokyo (1)

**Great Cormorant***Phalacrocorax carbo*

- 24 Oct** Ariake District, Tokyo (9); Hamarikyu Gardens, Tokyo (8)
- 26 Oct** Lake Kawaguchi (2)
- 30 Oct** Arashiyama Bamboo Forest, Kyoto (6)
- 1 Nov** Miyajima, Hiroshima (5)
- 3 Nov** Osaka (1)

**Little Egret***Egretta garzetta*

- 24 Oct** Ariake District, Tokyo (3); Hamarikyu Gardens, Tokyo (1)
- 27 Oct** Matsumoto, Nagano (1)
- 30 Oct** Arashiyama Bamboo Forest, Kyoto (7)
- 1 Nov** Miyajima, Hiroshima (1)

**Great Egret***Ardea alba*

- 24 Oct** Hamarikyu Gardens, Tokyo (1)
- 30 Oct** Arashiyama Bamboo Forest, Kyoto (1)

**Grey Heron***Ardea cinerea*

- 24 Oct** Ariake District, Tokyo (1); Hamarikyu Gardens, Tokyo (1)
- 25 Oct** Hakone, Kanagawa (1)
- 26 Oct** Lake Kawaguchi (1)
- 30 Oct** Arashiyama Bamboo Forest, Kyoto (2)
- 1 Nov** Miyajima, Hiroshima (1)
- 3 Nov** Osaka (1)

**Black Kite***Milvus migrans lineatus*

- 24 Oct** Ariake District, Tokyo (1)
- 25 Oct** Hakone, Kanagawa (6)
- 26 Oct** Lake Kawaguchi (3)
- 27 Oct** Matsumoto, Nagano (1)
- 29 Oct** Kenrokuen Garden, Kanazawa (6)
- 30 Oct** Arashiyama Bamboo Forest, Kyoto (3)  
All were of the "Black-eared" subspecies

**Japanese Green Woodpecker***Picus awokera*

- 28 Oct** Shirakawa, Gifu (1)

**Common Kestrel***Falco tinnunculus*

- 31 Oct** Outer Kyoto (1)

**Bull-headed Shrike***Lanius bucephalus*

- 26 Oct** Oshino (1)

**Eurasian Jay***Garrulus glandarius*

- 28 Oct** Shirakawa, Gifu (1)

**Carrion Crow***Corvus corone orientalis*

- 26 Oct** Oshino (2); Lake Kawaguchi (10)
- 27 Oct** Matsumoto, Nagano (10)
- 29 Oct** Kenrokuen Garden, Kanazawa (4)
- 30 Oct** Arashiyama Bamboo Forest, Kyoto (~30)
- 31 Oct** Nara (~20)
- 3 Nov** Osaka (10)

**Large-billed Crow***Corvus macrorhynchos japonensis*

- 23 Oct** Jingu Shrine, Tokyo (8); Sumida Park, Tokyo (10)
- 24 Oct** Hamarikyu Gardens, Tokyo (~30)
- 25 Oct** Hakone, Kanagawa (10)
- 28 Oct** Shirakawa, Gifu (2)
- 3 Nov** Osaka (4)

**Varied Tit***Sittiparus varius*

- 28 Oct** Shirakawa, Gifu (1)  
**30 Oct** Ryoanji Temple, Kyoto (1); Kinkaku-ji Temple, Kyoto (2)  
**31 Oct** Nara (1)

**Cinereous Tit***Parus cinereus*

- 24 Oct** Hamarikyu Gardens, Tokyo (2)  
**27 Oct** Matsumoto, Nagano (3)  
**30 Oct** Ryoanji Temple, Kyoto (2); Kinkaku-ji Temple, Kyoto (2)  
**31 Oct** Nara (1)  
**3 Nov** Osaka (1)

**Brown-eared Bulbul***Hypsipetes amaurotis*

- 23 Oct** Jingu Shrine, Tokyo (~20)  
**24 Oct** Ariake District, Tokyo (8); Hamarikyu Gardens, Tokyo (10)  
**26 Oct** Lake Kawaguchi (1)  
**27 Oct** Matsumoto, Nagano (~15)  
**29 Oct** Kenrokuen Garden, Kanazawa (6)  
**30 Oct** Arashiyama Bamboo Forest, Kyoto (1); Ryoanji Temple, Kyoto (4)  
**31 Oct** Nara (7)  
**3 Nov** Osaka (5)



**Long-tailed Tit***Aegithalos caudatus*

- 26 Oct Oshino (10)
- 28 Oct Shirakawa, Gifu (4)
- 29 Oct Kenrokuen Garden, Kanazawa (4)
- 30 Oct Kinkaku-ji Temple, Kyoto (4)
- 31 Oct Nara (3)

**Warbling White-eye***Zosterops japonicus*

- 30 Oct Kinkaku-ji Temple, Kyoto (2)

**White-cheeked Starling***Spodiopsar cineraceus*

- 24 Oct Hamarikyu Gardens, Tokyo (3)
- 26 Oct Lake Kawaguchi (~20); Matsumoto (~500 on wires in city centre after dusk)
- 27 Oct Matsumoto, Nagano (4)

**Daurian Redstart***Phoenicurus aureoreus*

- 26 Oct Lake Kawaguchi (1)
- 27 Oct Matsumoto, Nagano (1)
- 31 Oct Nara (2)

**Brown Dipper***Cinclus pallasii*

- 28 Oct Shirakawa, Gifu (Pair)

**Eurasian Tree Sparrow***Passer montanus*

- 23 Oct Sumida Park, Tokyo (3)
- 24 Oct Hamarikyu Gardens, Tokyo (~40)
- 26 Oct Oshino (10); Lake Kawaguchi (~50)
- 27 Oct Matsumoto, Nagano (~20)
- 30 Oct Arashiyama Bamboo Forest, Kyoto (10)
- 31 Oct Nara (10)
- 3 Nov Osaka (~20)

**Grey Wagtail***Motacilla cinerea*

- 27 Oct Matsumoto, Nagano (1)
- 28 Oct Shirakawa, Gifu (1)

**White Wagtail***Motacilla alba lugens*

- 24 Oct Hamarikyu Gardens, Tokyo (4)
- 25 Oct Hakone, Kanagawa (1)
- 26 Oct Lake Kawaguchi (3)
- 27 Oct Matsumoto, Nagano (5)
- 28 Oct Shirakawa, Gifu (2)
- 30 Oct Arashiyama Bamboo Forest, Kyoto (1)
- 3 Nov Osaka (6)

**Japanese Wagtail***Motacilla grandis*

- 25 Oct Hakone, Kanagawa (2)
- 27 Oct Matsumoto, Nagano (2)
- 28 Oct Shirakawa, Gifu (2)
- 29 Oct Kenrokuen Garden, Kanazawa (3)
- 30 Oct Arashiyama Bamboo Forest, Kyoto (1)

**Oriental Greenfinch***Chloris sinica*

- 25 Oct Hakone, Kanagawa (1)
- 26 Oct Oshino (3)
- 27 Oct Matsumoto, Nagano (3)
- 31 Oct Nara (3)

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