



VICTOR EMANUEL NATURE TOURS

ITINERARY

JAPAN: SUMMER HOKKAIDŌ

BIRDS, WILDLIFE & CULTURE IN THE LAND OF THE AINU

JUNE 4–20, 2024

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Narcissus Flycatcher, Hokkaido © Mark Brazil

Hokkaidō, Japan's second largest island and single largest prefecture, is unique in many ways. Situated at the northern end of the archipelago, it differs greatly from the rest of Japan thanks to the deep Tsugaru Strait that separates it from Honshū and islands further south. In many respects it resembles, from a natural history perspective at least, parts of the Russian Far East, though with an infinitely better and more accessible infrastructure!

The landscapes of Hokkaidō are delightfully varied, ranging from volcanic peaks and beautiful calderas and crater lakes to coastal wildflower meadows and lowland lakes, lagoons, and wetlands. We will explore a wide range of habitats from sub-alpine stone-pine woodland through towering boreal and cool temperate forest, to coastal grasslands and wildflower meadows in search of the indigenous and migratory birds and mammals that call Hokkaidō home.

Any journey in Japan exposes the visitor to daily doses of incidental Japanese culture which ranges from roadside Shinto shrines (devoted to the indigenous Japanese animistic religion) to ubiquitous hot and cold drinks vending machines, and taking in washoku (Japanese cuisine) and onsen (hot spring bathing). However, Japanese culture in Hokkaidō is as recent as western culture is in New Zealand —essentially dating back to widespread colonization during the 19th century. Prior to the arrival of the Japanese, the indigenous ethnic population of the island was entirely Ainu, a northern people descended from the ancient Jōmon people. Today, few Ainu remain, but their culture, and especially their deification of various iconic species of wildlife (Red-crowned Crane, Brown Bear, Blakiston's Fish Owl, Orca, salmon and so on) and their traditional ways of adapting to life in the natural environment of Hokkaidō, where winters are very severe, is fascinating. These twin cultural elements, both Ainu and Japanese, will run through our tour as we explore the Daisetsu, Shiretoko, and Kushiro Wetland national parks and many other birding areas in search of a wide array of native avian species, many of which are East Asian specialties. This tour also includes a number of inshore boat trips dedicated to marine mammal watching; in addition to searching for them, we will also focus heavily on seeing the coastal seabirds to be found around Hokkaidō.



Ainu Dance Group, Hokkaido © Mark Brazil

Hokkaidō offers an interesting array of birds and mammals in diverse habitats against wonderful landscapes and in the context of two intriguing cultures. All of these features make for a delightful birds, nature and culture tour.

June 4-5, Day 1-2: Arrive in Kushiro. Participants who depart the U.S. June 4 will arrive in Kushiro (KUH) June 5, east Hokkaidō, by way of Tōkyō, Haneda (HND).

Mark and Mayumi will be waiting for you in the Kushiro Airport terminal building where, after stowing our main luggage in our vehicle, we will have lunch and preview our journey ahead. Thereafter we will begin our journey northwards, bound for the Akan-Mashu National Park.

Participants wanting to avoid the risk of misconnecting with the group should consider arriving in Tōkyō on or before June 4 and spending the night. Upon request, VENT will be happy to assist with any additional lodging arrangements.

As we drive northwards this afternoon, we will introduce the natural history and varied cultures of Hokkaidō and make stops at bridges over the Akan River to look for our first Hokkaidō riverine and riparian birds. These will likely include: the ubiquitous Oriental Turtle-Dove, “Eastern” Carrion and Large-billed crows, Eurasian Tree Sparrow, the widespread Gray and White wagtails, Long-tailed Rose Finch, Oriental Greenfinch, and Meadow Bunting.

At dusk this evening we will spend some time outside our accommodation waiting, listening and watching for the strange calls and display flight of the Eurasian Woodcock.

For the adventurous, this evening will provide the first of many opportunities to experience *onsen*—Japanese hot spring bathing culture. Don’t worry! Bathing is segregated, and explanations will be provided on-hand from Mark and Mayumi to help you enjoy this highly therapeutic and relaxing indigenous hot water healing “treatment.” which is particularly recommended for those suffering from jet lag, muscle or joint aches, or almost any kind of condition except low blood pressure!



Long-tailed Rosefinch © Brian Gibbons

NIGHT (June 5): Hotel & Spa Resort La Vista, Akangawa, Kushiro

June 6, Day 3: Akankohan Onsen. This morning we will birdwatch beside the river and forest close to our accommodation, then later take a walk in the woods beside Lake Akan with a member of the local Ainu community, learning about their culture and relationship with nature. Birds we will seek include Warbling White-eye, our first gorgeous Blue-and-white and Narcissus flycatchers, and a secretive songster famed in Japanese literature—Japanese Bush Warbler. The song of the latter will be an accompaniment on many of our walks in the days ahead.

Today’s lunch will be at an Ainu specialty restaurant in the settlement of Akankohan, after which we will drive out to Lake Onnetto and birdwatch in the forests along the trail to a strangely hot waterfall—Yunotani. Along the

way we will be looking for our first woodpeckers of the trip, namely Japanese Pygmy and Great Spotted woodpeckers.

In the evening, we will visit the Ikor Ainu Theatre in Akan to watch a display of Ainu music and dance, deepening our understanding of this indigenous culture.

NIGHT: Hotel & Spa Resort La Vista, Akangawa, Kushiro

June 7, Day 4: Akan to Lake Shikaribetsu and Nukabira. On offer this morning will be an optional pre-breakfast birding wander close to our accommodation to look for Brown Dipper, Brown-headed Thrush and Masked Bunting. After breakfast we will set off on our journey to a pair of lakes in central Hokkaidō. We will picnic along the way to allow time in the cooler boreal forests of our destination where we will look for Japanese and Siberian Blue robins, Red-flanked Bluetail, and other species, and perhaps hear or even see one of Hokkaidō's unexpected mammals—Northern Pika. As dusk falls, we will try again for displaying Eurasian Woodcock.

Tonight's accommodation will be a very Japanese cultural experience staying in a very rural hotel Japanese-style, sleeping on futon mattresses in simple rooms with tatami-mat flooring.

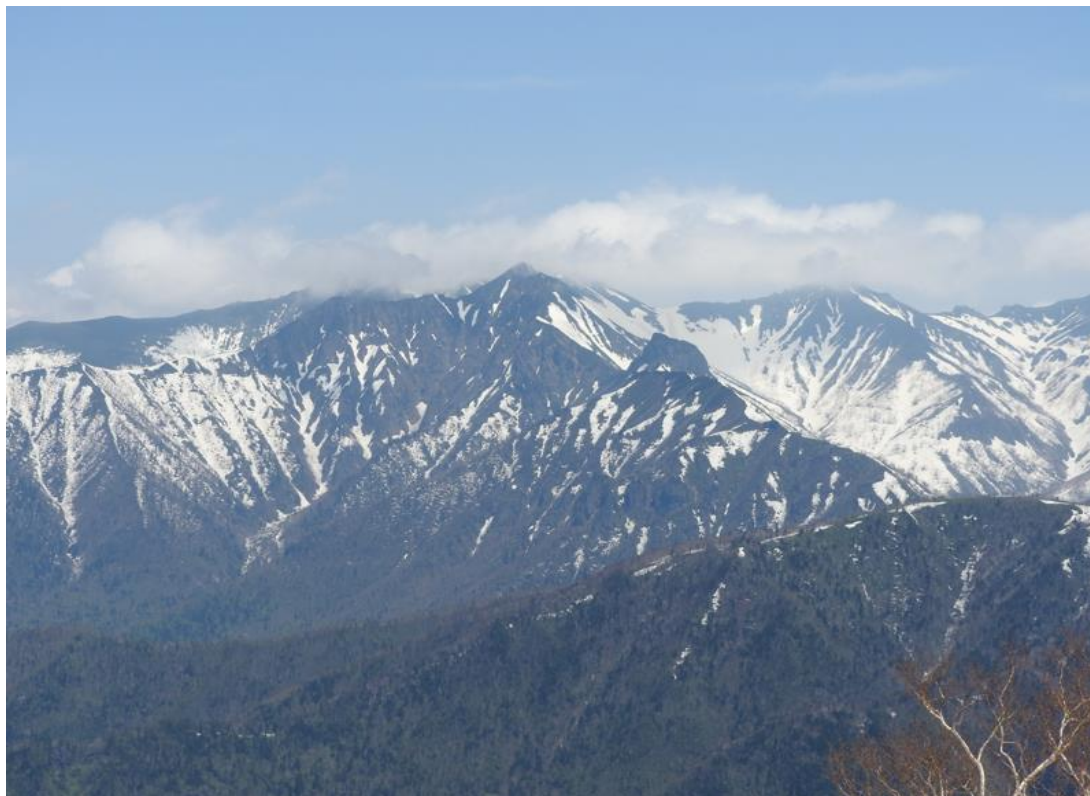


Brown Dipper © Machiel Valkenburg

NIGHT: Nukabira Onsen Nakamura, Hokkaido

June 8, Day 5: Nukabira to Asahidake Onsen. Our optional pre-breakfast birding this morning will be from our accommodation through the village and local forest to the shores of the nearby reservoir. As we walk, we will listen to flycatchers and Brown-headed Thrushes in their morning chorus as we look for Oriental Cuckoo, woodpeckers, Coal and Japanese tits, Asian House-Martin, and Eurasian Nuthatch. With luck we might even see an enormous White-throated Needletail flash overhead or swoop down to drink.

Our onward journey today towards the Daisetsu National Park will include a break to admire the panoramic view from the Mikuni Pass (1,134 meters) of a one-million-year-old caldera now filled with forest, before descending to see the Souunkyo Gorge. We may perhaps find a Brown Dipper beside the river which has carved the gorge, then continue onwards to eat lunch locally in the lowland town of Higashikawa, before we climb back up to higher elevation and to our accommodation at Asahidake Onsen (1,100 meters).



Daisetsu Mountains, Hokkaido © Mark Brazil

Along the way we will watch along the roadsides for Bull-headed Shrike, Brown-eared Bulbul, and Amur (Stejneger's) Stonechat. After checking in at our resort hotel, we will explore local trails in the semi-boreal forest around Asahidake Onsen, admiring spring flowers and looking for Black Woodpecker, Eurasian (Spotted) Nutcracker, Eastern Crowned Warbler, and Sakhalin Leaf Warbler, all the while watching for swifts overhead.

NIGHT: Hotel Bear Monte, Asahidake Onsen, Hokkaidō

June 9, Day 6: Asahidake Onsen. This morning we will ride the ropeway (gondola/cable-car), which starts just a short walk from our hotel up to the Sugatami area on the flank of Mt Asahi. The highlands of Daisetsu National Park have the Ainu name Kamui Mintara (literally playground of the gods). Here, at 1,580 meters, the weather will be much cooler. As we walk a short loop trail between, or perhaps over, late, packed snow patches, we will be on the look-out for a number of birds adapted to the cooler summer climate of the Japanese Stone Pine and low birch scrub at the tree-line. Our main avian targets will be another delightful small songster—Siberian Rubythroat—along with Olive-backed Pipit, and we will search for the colorful Pine Grosbeak, a scarce bird in Hokkaidō. If the stone pine produces cones this year, we may be lucky and see Eurasian (Spotted Nutcracker) at this elevation, and around the stone pines there is always the chance of a Japanese Accentor, a summer visitor from further south.

We may choose to eat our picnic lunch on the mountainside if the weather is conducive, or we may descend to the Asahidake Onsen campsite to walk trails at lower elevations where we will search for the secretive Asian Stubtail

and the quiet and easily overlooked Asian Brown Flycatcher. Coal, Marsh, and Japanese tits are all here as are Eurasian Nuthatch, Eurasian Treecreeper, and Eurasian Wren—so we will be kept busy!

NIGHT: Hotel Bear Monte, Asahidake Onsen, Hokkaido

June 10, Day 7: Asahidake Onsen to Shiobetsu. Depending on yesterday's weather and successes in Kamui Mintara, we may opt to ride up to the higher elevation area at Sugatami again for a second chance at higher elevation species, or spend our time on the lower elevation trails closer to our accommodation. Some of Hokkaidō's Forest songsters are secretive and elusive so having extra time is important for obtaining views. We will also be on the look-out for Eurasian Jay, Long-tailed Tit, Eastern Crowned and Sakhalin Leaf warblers, and any Eurasian (Spotted) Nutcrackers remaining at lower elevations.

Leaving Daisetsu behind, we will travel further east now and take our picnic lunch near the waterfalls in Sounkyo Gorge as we travel to Lake Oketo. There, we will spend the latter part of the afternoon close to the lake looking for Oriental Cuckoo, Black Woodpecker, Blue-and-white Flycatcher, and Siberian Blue Robin. It is here that we may also encounter our first White-tailed Eagles, and we will watch the Asian House-Martins that breed beneath the reservoir's Kanako Dam as we listen for Northern Hawk-Cuckoo.



Blue-and-white Flycatcher, Hokkaido © Mark Brazil

NIGHT: Shiobetsu, Tsuru Tsuru Onsen, Hokkaido

June 11, Day 8: Shiobetsu to Abashiri. Before breakfast we will take a walk around our accommodation, looking for Great Spotted Woodpecker, White-cheeked Starling, Russet Sparrow, the by-now familiar Meadow and Masked buntings, and anything else we can find before moving on to the coast. We have left the higher elevations and cooler forests behind us now and over the next few days we will focus on lakes beside the Sea of Okhotsk, the cool sea that separates Hokkaidō from Russia. In winter, sea ice occurs along this coast.

Our first stop will be at the south end of Lake Notoro where we will encounter our first Black-tailed Gulls and perhaps a few migrant Black-headed Gulls. Occasionally, shorebirds such as Red-necked Stint and Gray-tailed Tattler occur on the lakeshore here, while Gray Herons wade in the shallows and pass overhead as they travel to

and from their nesting colony. We will scan the lake's shoreline also for our first elegant Red-crowned Cranes, one of Japan's most iconic species and an Ainu deity—Sarurun Kamui (the marsh deity)—and White-tailed Eagle, if we haven't seen one already. Next, we will visit Lake Abashiri to walk a woodland track beside the eastern shore. The lake itself may hold late lingering Greater Scaup and other waterfowl, but in the lakeside forest we will be watching for the spectacularly plumaged Mandarin Duck and looking for woodpeckers. We will hope for White-backed and Gray-headed woodpeckers. Lesser Spotted Woodpecker is also a possibility here, as is Black Woodpecker. Thanks to the presence of so many woodpecker species, their many holes in the lakeside trees offer nesting habitat for both Chestnut-cheeked Starling and Russet Sparrow, and larger natural cavities are used by Mandarin Duck.

NIGHT: Hotel Abashirikoso, Abashiri, Hokkaido

June 12, Day 9: Abashiri. The shallow coastal lagoon of Lake Toufutsu, the flower meadows on the stabilized dunes separating the lagoon from the sea, and the sea beyond, will be the habitats that we explore today. Two or three pairs of Red-crowned Cranes breed in the reedbeds around the lagoon, White-tailed Eagle are often present, there is a breeding colony of Gray Heron near the west end, and large numbers of Great Cormorant forage at the lake. We will see our first Slaty-backed Gulls along the coast and at the lagoon, and will look for breeding Gadwall, late-lingering Eurasian Wigeon, Falcated Duck, Eastern Spot-billed Duck, Common Pochard, Tufted Duck, and Greater Scaup. Occasionally single Whooper Swans even remain here over the summer.

Visiting the coastal flower meadows, we will be watching for Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler and Amur (Stejneger's) Stonechats singing from the low wild rose bushes, while overhead the extraordinary aerial displays of Latham's Snipe (a summer migrant here from Australia) will be an entertaining distraction. Our targets here include Chestnut-eared Bunting and an extraordinary member of the woodpecker family—Eurasian Wryneck.



Latham's Snipe, Hokkaido © Mark Brazil



Chestnut-eared Bunting © Kaz Shinoda

While exploring offshore by chartered boat this afternoon, there are opportunities for a number of cetaceans including Dall's Porpoise, Northern Minke Whale, and even Fin Whale. We will be watching not only for these but also for any seabirds that we can find. As we leave the harbor at Abashiri, we will see Japanese (Temminck's) Cormorant, Black-tailed and Slaty-backed gulls, and, once offshore, we may encounter loons (Red-throated, Arctic, or Pacific). Rhinoceros Auklets are usually found close inshore; further offshore, large numbers of migratory Short-tailed Shearwaters gather. They, like the snipe, have come from the Antipodes. At their peak they number more than 100,000 birds. If conditions are right, the sight, sound, and strangely musty smell of the birds are extraordinary. Among them we may find Flesh-footed Shearwater and Northern Fulmar (now recognized as a

separate species by some authorities as Pacific Fulmar, which here is invariably dark). Looking back to shore from the bay, the landscape is impressive, with isolated Mt Shari rising beyond Lake Toufutsu and the entire range of mountains, all volcanoes, that form the Shiretoko Peninsula to the east.



Fin Whale & Short-tailed Shearwaters, Hokkaido Mark Brazil

NIGHT: Hotel Abashirikoso, Abashiri, Hokkaido

June 13, Day 10: Abashiri to Shiretoko Rausu. After some local pre-breakfast birding, we make a visit to the excellent Northern Peoples Museum, which explains the presence of Ainu in Hokkaidō in the context of other Northern Hemisphere peoples. However, if for weather reasons our boat trip on the previous day was not possible, we will head out to sea this morning.

Continuing eastward along the Sea of Okhotsk, we may pause again at Lake Toufutsu to look for any species that eluded us yesterday, particularly Eastern Marsh Harrier, before heading to the Shiretoko Peninsula and the town of Rausu. In the late afternoon we hope to take a small boat cruise along the rocky western side of the peninsula where dapper Spectacled Guillemots breed. These entertaining relatives of Black and Pigeon guillemots have the red feet and red mouth-lining common to all of the guillemot species, and we are likely to hear their high-pitched cries over the sound of the waves. We may be lucky and see Brown Bear along the shore or White-tailed Eagle overhead, while Pacific Swifts hurtle about—they nest amongst the rocky crags of the peninsula.

After our excursion we will drive up and over the Shiretoko Pass on our way to Rausu. If the weather is clear we will be able to admire the eastward view across the Nemuro Channel to Russian-occupied Kunashiri Island in the distance.

NIGHT: Shiretoko Serai, Rausu, Hokkaido

June 14, Day 11: Shiretoko Rausu. Much of the Shiretoko Peninsula lies not only within a national park, but also within a World Natural Heritage Site. The volcanic scenery of this dramatic peninsula is best seen from the sea. The Nemuro Channel, which carries cold water southwards between Shiretoko and Kunashiri, acts like a funnel, concentrating marine life in the area. It is particularly renowned for the numerous Orca that summer here and the large concentrations of Short-tailed Shearwaters that gather here on migration. We will visit Rausu Harbor to join a boat trip dedicated to Orca-watching and head out into the channel for the morning. Black-tailed and Slaty-backed gulls will be around us, and Black-headed Gull, “Kamchatka” Common Gull, and Black-legged Kittiwake are also possibilities. Even a late-lingering Glaucous-winged Gull is not out of the question. Japanese (Temminck’s) Cormorant are common here and occasional Pelagic Cormorant can be seen in summer, too. The Orca often put on a fine display of social activity allowing quite close approach. While watching for them we may also see other marine mammals such as Dall’s Porpoise, but our targets will be any seabirds that are present. After the shearwaters, Rhinoceros Auklet is the commonest species, followed by Red-necked Phalarope and Northern Fulmar. We will remain ever-watchful for the range of seabird species that are occasionally sighted here in summer. These include Pomarine Jaeger, Black-footed Albatross, the very rare Short-tailed Albatross, and even Japanese Murrelet.



Rhinoceros Auklets, Hokkaido © Mark Brazil

In the afternoon, we will travel a short distance to the south to visit the low coastal spit at Notsuke. Here, in the shallow waters of the inner bay we will see more Gray Herons and look for subadult non-breeding Red-crowned Cranes. The coastal flower meadows are home to Eurasian Skylark and Amur (Stejneger’s) Stonechat, and it is here that we will look for displaying Middendorff’s Grasshopper Warbler and listen for the archetypical bird that inspired the Swiss clock—Common Cuckoo. Overhead, we are likely to spot Bank Swallow and perhaps Barn Swallow, while watching for White-tailed Eagle.

Returning to Rausu we will drop in at a site where both Sakhalin Grasshopper Warbler and Lanceolated Warbler still occur. Both are elusive skulkers, the former with an explosive song and the latter with an extended reeling trill. More common and more easily seen is the Black-browed Reed Warbler.

NIGHT: Shiretoko Serai, Rausu, Hokkaido

June 15, Day 12: Shiretoko Rausu to Nemuro. As summer weather is unpredictable, we aim to take a second boat trip out into the Nemuro Channel this morning for more chances of marine mammals and different seabirds before heading south down Hokkaidō’s eastern coast and leaving the dramatic scenery of the Shiretoko Peninsula behind. We may drop in again at riverine grasslands and Notsuke Peninsula in search of any elusive species or continue to Lake Furen in southeast Hokkaidō and our next accommodation on the Nemuro Peninsula.

NIGHT: Hotel Kaiyotei, Nemuro, Hokkaido

June 16, Day 13: Nemuro Peninsula. Exploring Hokkaidō's southeasternmost cape today, we plan to take a boat trip out from Ochiishi to circumnavigate two small offshore islands. Here, we will see Spectacled Guillemot, Rhinoceros Auklet, perhaps Ancient Murrelet, and Sooty and Short-tailed shearwaters as we look for Tufted Puffin at their southwestern most breeding site in the western Pacific. Black-tailed and Slaty-backed gulls are common and have colonies on the islets where we will watch the Japanese (Temminck's) and Pelagic cormorants very carefully as we search for the scarce Red-faced Cormorant. White-tailed Eagles frequent the islands in search of prey, and seeing a member of the slowly recovering Sea Otter population is a distinct possibility. This species was hunted to extinction in Japan in the late 19th century and was also almost exterminated from the Kuril Islands to the north. Thankfully, their 20th century recovery has allowed them to extend their range back southwards to include this tiny corner of Hokkaidō.

If inclement weather prevents us from exploring off-shore, we will visit various capes around the Nemuro Peninsula to search for some of the same species by telescope from shore.

NIGHT: Hotel Kaiyotei, Nemuro, Hokkaido

June 17, Day 14: Nemuro Peninsula, Cape Kiritappu to Yoroushi Onsen. If bad weather prevented us from sailing yesterday, we will take the morning boat from Ochiishi in search of seabirds. Alternatively, we will continue westwards along the south coast pausing at coastal meadows and lagoons in search of any species we haven't found so far, as we make our way to Cape Kiritappu. In particular we will be looking for Eastern Buzzard on roadside poles and wires. Japanese (Temminck's) Cormorant breed at the cape, and around the rocky headland there are sometimes summering Harlequin Duck and perhaps loons on the sea. The cape is home to Eurasian Skylark and Amur (Stejneger's) Stonechat, and may provide us with our second opportunity to admire singing Siberian Rubythroat, a species which, unfortunately, is undergoing a decline in Japan.

We will reach our next accommodation in the late afternoon, with time to familiarize ourselves with the birds at the bird feeders outside the lobby windows, which typically include Japanese Pygmy and Great Spotted woodpeckers, Eurasian Jay, Marsh and Japanese tits, and Eurasian Nuthatch. We will wander in the valley at Yoroushi to look again for Brown Dipper on the local river and hope that the enormous but elusive Crested Kingfisher may put in a brief appearance.

Our delightful accommodation has numerous Japanese woodblocks prints sufficient to delight any art lovers. It also has a very special hot spring, right beside the rushing river, from which it is sometimes possible to see Brown Dipper. However, as our hotel is within the territory of a pair of Blakiston's Fish-Owl, this nocturnal bird will be our target species here for the next two nights. Long vigils may be required while hoping that one of these globally threatened birds comes in to a feeding pool set up specially to help the local pair. With no more than 100 pairs left, this is an extremely rare species, and for which we must be prepared to invest considerable time so that we may see one.



Siberian Rubythroat, Hokkaido © Mark Brazil

NIGHT: Yuyado Daiichi, Yoroushi Onsen, Hokkaido

June 18, Day 15: Yoroushi Onsen. Before breakfast this morning, we will take a walk in the valley in which our hotel is situated. This area and the adjacent local forest are good for summer birds. By now we are likely to have seen most of them, but the very vocal White-bellied Green-Pigeon, often elusive elsewhere, can be seen with greater ease here. While concentrating on that species, we'll also watch for Sakhalin Leaf Warbler, Asian Stubtail, Eurasian Treecreeper, Japanese and Brown-headed thrushes, Japanese Grosbeak, Eurasian (Gray-bellied or Baikal) Bullfinch, and Hawfinch, some of which may have eluded us to this point.

After breakfast, we will set off to explore the eastern portion of the Akan–Mashu National Park. At the viewpoint overlooking the beautiful crater lake of Lake Mashu, we will admire not only the spectacular scenery of this volcanic region, but also look for Pacific Swifts overhead and keep an eye open for any raptors. Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Northern (Eurasian) Goshawk (now recognized by some authorities as a distinct species from Northern Goshawk of North America: Eurasian Goshawk), and Black (Black-eared) Kite are all possible here as is White-tailed Eagle. Continuing a little further west, we will visit briefly the bright yellow sulphuroles and bubbling steam vents at Iwo-zan to admire this extraordinary geological feature, before visiting the woodland along the shore of Lake Kussharo in search of any woodpeckers we may have missed, especially White-backed and Gray-headed. Common Mergansers are often at the lake where the Kushiro River flows out of the lake, and we may find Mandarin Duck and White-tailed Eagle in the area too. Beside the lakeshore at Kotan (the Ainu word for village) there is a small museum here dedicated to local Ainu, which we may visit if the local birds allow us time.

We will return to Yoroushi in the afternoon before settling in for another evening vigil for the enormous fish-owl.

NIGHT: Yuyado Daiichi, Yoroushi Onsen, Hokkaido

June 19, Day 16: Yoroushi Onsen to Tsurui. Having seen the Kushiro River where it flows out of Lake Kussharo, today we will head downstream and spend the day around the Kushiro Wetland National Park. In particular, we



Red-crowned Crane, Summer © Mark Brazil

will visit the lakes on the eastern side of the wetland in search of Common Cuckoo; pairs of Red-crowned Cranes with their young, cinnamon-colored chicks; Red-necked Grebe, one or two pairs of which breed in this region; Black-browed Reed Warbler; and Reed Bunting in the reed beds around Lake Takkobu before visiting the Hosoka Viewpoint. From here we will be able to see the full width of Japan's largest lowland protected area. Most of Tōkyō could fit within this wetland. We will scan by telescope for cranes and Sika (Japanese Deer) out in the marsh, while constantly watching overhead for White-throated Needletail.

In the latter part of the afternoon, we will drop in at the Kushiro City Museum. This small facility surprises visitors with the quality of its excellent displays, and we will be able to review and reflect on our trip as we focus on the floor devoted to Ainu culture and the floor devoted to Hokkaidō's natural history.

As on so many nights of our tour, tonight's small family-run hotel boasts a thermal spring, but this one differs from all the others in being slightly alkaline, giving the waters a wonderfully silky-smooth feel. For those who have become *onsen* aficionados, this will be a wonderfully relaxing way to round out our "Birding in the Land of the Ainu" journey.

NIGHT: Hotel Taito, Tsurui, Hokkaido

June 20, Day 17: Tsurui to Kushiro Airport. After breakfast this morning we will bid farewells and transfer to Kushiro Airport for the morning flight to Tōkyō Haneda (NH 4772 departing 09:55 a.m. arriving 11:40 a.m.) and onward connections. If transferring between Haneda and Narita airports for your international flight home, please allow two hours for the transfer by shuttle bus between the airports, plus 2–3 hours for check-in.

The shuttle bus fare is JPY 3,100 a person. The leaders will show you exactly how to reserve a seat and board the inter-airport shuttle, whose features include destination announcements in English. It's very easy to make the trip to Narita.

Participants wanting to lower the risk of misconnecting with their homeward flight should consider adding an extra post-tour night for sightseeing and/or shopping in Tōkyō. Upon request, VENT will be happy to assist with any additional arrangements.

TOUR SIZE: This tour is limited to 9 participants.

TOUR LEADERS: Mark Brazil and Mayumi Brazil



Mark Brazil is a frequent expedition leader of small, land-based, wildlife-focused expeditions in Africa, South America, South Asia, and East Asia. He is a regular lecturer on expedition cruise vessels traveling widely from the Arctic to Antarctica and many destinations between. He is best known for his extensive experience of birding in Japan and for his many publications. Born and educated in the UK, Mark has degrees in Biology, English Literature, and Psychology. He has had careers in conservation biology, in natural history television (20+ years), as a university lecturer (9 years), and now works mainly as a freelance author, editor, and wildlife-expedition leader. He has lived in England, Scotland, and New Zealand, and is now a long-term resident of Hokkaidō, northern Japan, where he and his wife, Mayumi, live in the Akan–Mashū National Park. Mark began birding as a child in the UK, studied avian behavioral-ecology for his PhD, and has since birded on every continent. He is fascinated by the amazing diversity of avian behavior. He began leading nature tours in 1980, became involved in the expedition cruise industry in 1998, and since 2007 he has worked exclusively in

the wildlife and adventure travel industry as a consultant, expedition leader, guide, and lecturer. In the last few years, he has been increasingly involved in outdoor guide training in Japan. His extensive travels across the length and breadth of Japan since 1980 have given him intimate knowledge of the country's birdlife, natural history, and culture. He is well-known for his numerous articles and many books relating to the region. Mark's most recent books are: *Japan: The Natural History of an Asian Archipelago* (2022) and *Wild Hokkaidō: A Guidebook to the National Parks and other Wild Places of Eastern Hokkaidō* (2021). His past books include: *Helm Field Guide to the Birds of Japan* (2018); *The Nature of Japan* (2018); *Helm Field Guide to the Birds of East Asia* (2009), *The Birds of Japan* (1991) and *A Birdwatcher's Guide to Japan* (1987).



Mayumi Brazil is a National Government Licensed Interpreter Guide. She was born and educated in Hokkaido, Japan. Her interests include Japanese Literature, film, and contemporary Japanese culture. She enjoys cross-cultural experiences and particularly enjoys explaining her own culture to others. She is self-confident in a multi-cultural environment, organized, and attentive to detail and customer needs. She is motivated to provide a positive experience for those with whom she travels. Mayumi has worked in various capacities in the travel and service sector. Since 2009, she has worked as a fixer and an interpreter, traveling extensively throughout Japan from Hokkaido to Okinawa with clients ranging from BBC Radio to groups and families. Her overseas travels have taken her to North and South America, Europe,

East Africa, South and East Asia, New Zealand, and Australia. Since 2009, Mayumi has worked on various expedition cruise ships as a lecturer and cultural demonstrator around Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. On land, she has co-led wildlife-focused expeditions with her husband, ornithologist and expedition leader Dr. Mark Brazil, in Bhutan, Brazil, India, Japan, Nepal, Rwanda, Sri Lanka, and Zambia, and has worked as an interpreter/guide in Japan for various companies catering to photographers, naturalists, and birdwatchers. Mayumi and Mark live in Teshikaga, east Hokkaido.

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for this tour is **\$10,595** based on double occupancy from Tōkyō. This includes all meals from dinner on Day 2 to breakfast on Day 17, lodging as stated in the itinerary, intra-Japan flights during the tour, ground transportation and three boat trips during the tour, as well as guide services provided by the tour leaders. The fee does not include airfare from your home to Tōkyō's Narita Airport and return from Tōkyō's Haneda Airport, airport departure taxes, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, telephone calls, laundry or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small party supplement may be charged. Rates are based on current 2023 pricing available and are subject to increase if the 2024 rates are raised.

The single-room accommodation supplement for this tour is **\$900**.

PLEASE NOTE: This tour is priced based on estimated 2023 rates. If our ground operators increase their prices, we reserve the right to surcharge for whatever those additional costs may be.

REGISTRATION & DEPOSIT: To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$1,000** per person. A second deposit of \$3,000 is due 210 days prior to departure (November 7, 2023). If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, the deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. If you would like to pay your deposit by check, money order, or bank transfer, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. The VENT registration form (available from the VENT office or by download at <https://ventbird.com>) should be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office.

PAYMENTS: All tour payments may be made by credit card (MasterCard or Visa), check, money order, or bank transfer (contact the VENT office for bank transfer information). These include initial deposits, second deposits, interim payments, final balances, special arrangements, etc. Full payment of the tour fee is due 150 days prior to the tour departure date (January 6, 2024).

CANCELLATION & REFUNDS:

Cancellation by Participant:

Refunds, if any, for any cancellation by a participant are made according to the following schedule: If participant cancels 180 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$500** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made between 179 and 151 days before departure date, the deposit is not refundable, but any payments covering the balance of the tour fee will be refunded. If cancellation is made fewer than 150 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre- and post-tour extensions. **For participants' protection, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance that covers trip cancellation/interruption.**

If participant cancels:

210 days or more before departure date

209 to 151 days before departure date

150 days or less before departure date

Participant's refund will be:

Participant's deposit minus \$500*

No refund of the deposit, but any payments on the balance of the tour fee will be refunded

No refund available

*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person. To qualify, cancellation must occur 180 days or more before departure date; deposit transfers must be made at the time of cancellation; and one transfer per deposit.

Cancellation by VENT:

If VENT cancels a tour prior to departure without cause or good reason, VENT will provide the participant a full refund, which will constitute full settlement to the participant. If VENT cancels or delays a tour or any portion of a tour as a result of any Force Majeure event, VENT will use its reasonable best efforts to refund any payments on the balance of the tour fee to participant; provided that, VENT will have no obligation to provide a participant with a refund and will not be liable or responsible to a participant, nor be deemed to have defaulted under or breached any applicable agreement, for any failure or delay in fulfilling or performing any term of such agreement. A “**Force Majeure**” event means any act beyond VENT’s control, including, without limitation, the following: (a) acts of God; (b) flood, fire, earthquake, hurricane, epidemic, pandemic or explosion; (c) war, invasion, hostilities (whether war is declared or not), terrorist threats or acts, riot or other civil unrest; (d) government order, law or actions; (e) embargoes or blockades; (f) national or regional emergency; (g) strikes, labor stoppages, labor slowdowns or other industrial disturbances; (h) shortage of adequate power or transportation facilities; and (i) any other similar events or circumstances beyond the control of VENT.

This VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy does not apply to air tickets purchased through VENT or to any special arrangements, such as additional hotel nights, that fall outside of the services described in the tour itinerary.

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.

TRAVEL INSURANCE: To safeguard against losses due to illness, accident, or other unforeseen circumstances, we strongly recommend the purchase of travel insurance as soon as possible after making a deposit. VENT has partnered with Redpoint Travel Protection as our preferred travel insurance provider. Through Redpoint, we recommend its Ripcord plan. Designed for all types of travelers, Ripcord is among the most comprehensive travel protection programs available.

Critical benefits of Ripcord include a completely integrated program with a single contact for emergency services, travel assistance, and insurance claims; **medical evacuation from your point of injury or illness to your hospital of choice**; comprehensive travel insurance for trip cancellation/interruption, primary medical expense coverage, death of pet, and much more. Optional expanded insurance coverage is available and includes items such as evacuation coverage in case of a natural disaster or political or security reasons, waiver for pre-existing medical conditions exclusion, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” benefit. Ripcord is available to U.S. and non-U.S. residents.*

For a price quote, or to purchase travel insurance, please visit: ripcordtravelprotection.com/ventbird; or click the **Ripcord** logo on our website (click Help and Trip Insurance); or call +1-415-481-0600. Pricing is based on age, trip cost, trip length, and level of coverage.

*To be eligible for the pre-existing medical condition exclusion waiver and the optional Cancel for Any Reason (CFAR) upgrade, you must purchase your policy within 15 days of making your first trip payment. The CFAR benefit provides reimbursement for 75% of covered costs, and increases the policy premium by approximately 50%. Policies may be purchased either for the full value of the tour fee at the time of deposit or in segments as individual tour payments are made (deposit, mid-payment, final balance, additional arrangements, etc.). The “pay as you go” approach reduces up-front expense and ensures that the amount paid toward your full policy premium is in proportion to the amount paid toward the full tour fee. If you choose to “pay as you go,” you must cover each deposit or payment within 15 days, and insure all non-refundable trip cost in order to maintain the CFAR benefit. Please refer to the policy for a full description of coverage

Coronavirus (COVID-19):

In line with the decision made by the federal government (including the CDC), Redpoint considers COVID-19 illness as any other seasonal respiratory illness. Providing only a positive Covid-19 test result will likely not be considered a covered event per the terms and conditions of the company's policy. Redpoint maintains a **Coronavirus FAQ** page on its website that addresses questions and concerns travelers may have regarding COVID-19 and Redpoint's policy. We strongly recommend that you visit the page for an overview of relevant topics.

Please visit the **Coronavirus FAQ** page at the following link: https://redpointtravelprotection.com/covid_19_faq/

EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES: In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES: In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

AIR INFORMATION: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Per person fees apply for each set of travel arrangements: \$50 domestic; \$75 international.* Many of our travelers choose to make their own air travel arrangements, but we emphasize the benefits to using our services. If you book your air arrangements yourself, Victor Emanuel Travel is unable to provide support in managing any flight delays and/or cancellations that could occur before and during a tour. When you purchase air tickets through Victor Emanuel Travel, our staff has ready access to your air ticket record and can provide assistance as problems arise. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements. Please be sure to check with the VENT office prior to purchasing your air ticket to confirm that the tour is sufficiently subscribed to operate. VENT cannot be held responsible for any air ticket penalties.

*An air ticket will be purchased by Victor Emanuel Travel on behalf of the traveler with the traveler's consent. A purchase is considered final upon receipt of payment. If a ticket is subsequently reissued at the behest of the traveler (i.e. voluntary change of plans), the same fee rates apply for the reissue process, in addition to any fees that may be charged by the airline.

BAGGAGE: When traveling within Japan, officially, one piece of checked luggage weighing no more than 44 lbs. (20 kg) is allowed free of charge. In addition, you are allowed one piece of carry-on luggage and whatever you carry over your arm or in your hands (i.e., coat, book, purse, umbrella, etc.). We recommend applying these guidelines to your international flights as well, as this will allow you to plan for all circumstances. We request that your luggage be limited to one medium-sized soft-side roller bag or duffel bag.

As a precaution against lost luggage, we suggest that you pack important travel documents, optical equipment, medications, basic toiletries, a change of clothes, and any other essential items in your carry-on bag. Please check with your airline for restrictions and fees. Due to ever-changing circumstances in U.S. government efforts to improve airport security, we recommend that you check the website of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for the most up to date information: <http://www.tsa.gov/>.

CLOTHING: We will be visiting Hokkaidō at the start of the northern summer and thus can expect cool temperatures in the mornings and evenings and at higher elevations, but warmer perhaps even hot temperatures during the day. Warm waterproof clothing is strongly advised, especially for our visit to the Daisetsu mountains

and offshore boat trips, as chilly winds are always possible. Raingear, including waterproof pants, is essential. It is recommended to bring multiple thin layers for personal temperature regulation, and casual attire is acceptable at all accommodations. In fact, many provide cotton yukata (robes) for use in the rooms, dining rooms and when visiting the hot springs.

Special Note About Clothing: During daily birding outings, please avoid clothes or accessories of bright colors, such as red, yellow, orange or any vivid tint. Although the birds and other wildlife are relatively approachable, when we are working hard to see a number of very elusive species, muted colors will definitely enhance our chances. Also, please avoid crackling nylon/plastic jackets and pants. This will enable the leaders to hear those critical, but so easily overlooked, subtle call notes of the birds we all want to see.

FOOTWEAR: Lightweight hiking shoes will be ideal for most of the trip; sneakers or athletic shoes will suffice in many situations. Please note that in Japan it is customary to remove your shoes when entering houses, traditional hotels (not Western hotels), temples, shrines and many other places. Each such site will provide slippers for indoor wear, but you may wish to bring your own indoor slippers for greater foot support or better fit. Note: Men with feet size 10 and larger may not find slippers in their size at some of the shoe removal stations.

LAUNDRY SERVICE: Laundry service will be available at some (**but NOT all**) of the hotels at which we stay in Japan. In many places this service consists of coin-operated, self-service machines.

CLIMATE & WEATHER: At the time of your visit, conditions in the Tōkyō area including Narita and Haneda can get rather warm and humid, with temperatures reaching 80 (°F) in bright, sunlit conditions. Rain is also a distinct possibility. On the northern island of Hokkaidō, the temperature may only reach 45° on an overcast or misty day. On the three boat trips in Hokkaidō, it will be distinctly chilly at times, which may require a sweater and a jacket with good wind and water proofing.

CONDITIONS:

Accommodations: Our accommodations in Hokkaidō are diverse in size and style and we consider them the most suitable in each area. Some are large, quality hotels, some are small local family-run hotels and inns. Each offers excellent breakfast and dinner (mostly Japanese style fixed menus), many provide unique hot spring (onsen) bathing/spa experiences, and some are fully Japanese style, with futon mattresses laid out on tatami- matted floors for a truly special Japanese experience. One lodging has hand basins in the rooms, but not en suite toilets/showers; these are available close to our rooms.

Walking conditions: Most of the walks undertaken on this trip will be of short distance (less than two miles) with varying amounts of ups and downs. One exception will be at higher elevation in Daisetsu National Park. Here because of the season, we may be walking on a rocky mountain trail, though with very little up and down, or over packed snow, as we look for Siberian Rubythroat, Olive-backed Pipit and Pine Grosbeak — specialist species of the elevation and stone pine forest here. Trekking poles of varying quality are available for temporary use at the cable car station in return for a donation to the national park trail maintenance.

Meals: You can expect very good food options throughout the tour. Some meals will be comprised of Japanese delicacies, and others will draw from Western cuisine, although Western food or vegan/vegetarian options may not be available at a number of locations. We will take out a few lunches from convenience stores, especially on occasions when cafés are not readily available. Convenience stores in Japan are of a different order than those in the U.S. They provide a higher status of food and drink than do those in the States. A wide variety of hot and cold foods and drinks are often available, and convenience stores make for timely and clean restroom stops too. These stops will also enable us to stock-up on snacks and drinks for a day in the field, and provide another cultural eye-opener.

Snacks & Drinks:

PLEASE NOTE: Many food products CANNOT be brought into Japan.

Pace: Walking will be at a relaxed pace, mainly on level ground.

Flash Photography and Recorded Playback: A great many people in Japan are keen photographers of wildlife, but in nearly all cases they scrupulously avoid using a flash. This is the standard to adopt when using a camera in Japan. Also, to honor the Japanese code of birding, we will not use playback of bird vocalizations except in a few special situations.

EQUIPMENT: You should have a pair of binoculars that are in good condition, along with a day pack (good for carrying books, sunscreen, camera, etc.). Your tour leader will have a spotting scope; however, you are welcome and encouraged to bring your own if you so wish. Other items that will be useful are a hat and sunscreen for sun protection, small flashlight or headlamp, alarm clock, and a small amount of non-spray insect repellent (any commercial product containing DEET in high concentrations is helpful). Insects are generally not a problem. Water is potable everywhere in Japan. Please bring your own water bottle on our daily excursions. All food and vegetables are safe.

PLEASE NOTE: Many food products CANNOT be brought into Japan.

The following items will come in handy during your trip to Japan.

- **Daypack**— A small daypack (either waterproof or with a strong plastic bag inside) is essential for carrying excess clothing, field guides, toiletries, optical equipment, food, and water.
- **Travel alarm clock** - Battery operated is best.
- **Cameras, lenses, memory cards, and extra batteries** - You should bring all the camera equipment and specialized camera batteries that you will need. However, standard batteries such as AAA, etc. are widely available in Japan and not worth the weight to ship in your luggage. UV and polarizing filters are recommended.
- **Plastic bags** - Very useful to protect equipment from rain and dust.
- **Polarized sunglasses with good UV protection** - Always a good idea; occasionally essential.
- **Personal toiletries**
- **Spare glasses or contact lenses**
- **Sunscreen, lip balm, skin lotions** – All strongly recommended. Sunscreen is essential when on the boat trips where UV light is reflected back from the sea surface and can cause burning remarkably quickly.
- **Handy-wipes/tissue packs** - Handy-wipes and paper tissues are especially useful. Participants should carry a sufficient supply for their personal needs for the entire tour, but these can also be purchased locally.
- **Washcloth** - A washcloth (face cloth) is recommended if you are accustomed to using one and think you'll require one, since it is not a typical Japanese amenity. Bath towels and hand towels, however, are standard in Japan.
- **Napkins** - A cloth napkin, or supply of paper napkins. Napkins may not be present in some hotels and restaurants.
- **Umbrella** - A small, collapsible umbrella may be useful for both rain and sun.
- **Eating utensils** - If you have difficulty using chopsticks (*o-hashhi*), we recommend bringing your own knife and fork in your checked luggage, as these items may not be available in some dining situations.
- **Water bottles** - Important if you like to carry a regular supply of water. The water at our accommodations is up to U.S. treatment standards, so quite drinkable. Bottled water will be available in convenience stores and vending machines.
- **Insect repellent** - Small amount of non-spray insect repellent could prove useful for unexpectedly “buggy” situations.

BINOCULARS:

Binoculars - Please bring a pair of binoculars in good condition. We strongly recommend good quality binoculars of 7x42, 8x32, 8x42, or 10x42 magnification. We recommend against mini-binoculars of any kind. “Minis” may

be small and lightweight; but they have an extremely small field of view and little light gathering power. Save the minis for the opera or symphony. Most 7x42, 8x32, or 8x42 binoculars are compact and light enough to handle expertly.

TRAVEL DOCUMENTS: A passport valid for six months beyond your planned return date is required to enter Japan. Please check the expiration date on your passport. **If it is not valid through** for at least 6 months beyond **your intended period of stay, you will need to renew it.** You will also want to make sure that you have at least two blank pages in your passport for entry and exit stamps.

As a safety measure, photocopy the first two pages of your passport and keep the photocopies in a safe place, so if your passport is lost you will have proof of identification. It may be worth your time to place a photocopy in each of your checked bag(s) and carry-ons, just as a back-up. Your passport should be signed and readily available at all times. You will need it for check-in at the airport on your day of departure as well as for inter-island flights, so **be careful not to pack it in your checked luggage.**

VISAS: Citizens of the United States are not required to have a visa for Japan for stays of less than 90 days. Non-United States citizens should check with their consulate/embassy for instructions.

NOTE:

Upon arrival in Japan, travelers will be required to complete documentation, and may be required to download several smartphone applications. If a traveler does not have a smartphone, most international airports offer an option for travelers to rent one upon arrival.

Travelers from the United States to Japan, regardless of their vaccination status, are no longer required to conduct COVID-19 testing and quarantine upon arrival. Travelers from countries other than the United States, or who have spent time in other countries in the 14 days prior to travel to Japan, may be subject to on-arrival COVID-19 testing and quarantine. For detailed information about on-arrival covid-19 test and quarantine period after entry into Japan, please visit https://www.mofa.go.jp/ca/fna/page4e_001053.html. Note that these regulations are subject to frequent changes, and travelers should regularly consult the latest applicable Japanese regulations at the link above. MHLW has launched a call center for the new quarantine measures; they can be reached by phone from 9:00 to 21:00, at 050-1751-2158 or 050-1741-8558.

Travelers entering Japan may use the Electronic Customs Declaration Gates (e-Gates) for customs clearance, which reduces human-to-human contact. Travelers may wish to learn more about the program before arriving in Japan. Please see the Japan Customs website for details: <https://www.customs.go.jp/english/>.

CURRENCY:

Japanese Yen (¥). During this tour exchange facilities are available only at the airport in Tōkyō, although cash can be drawn on a card from some ATMs. MasterCard and Visa are accepted, but not at all accommodations or shops. Automatic teller machines can be found in some convenience stores. Check your card logo against the machine and don't forget your pin number and to keep your pin secure!

Should you extend your time in Japan beyond what is offered in the program, you should strongly consider obtaining yen. Please check with your bank and credit card issuer for more information regarding banking and the use of ATM and credit cards overseas.

ELECTRICITY: Electricity in Japan is 110 volts, 50 cycles, AC. The Japanese-style plug (Type A) has two parallel flat blades, similar to most American plugs, but actually slightly smaller. In Japan, both tips on a plug and the openings in wall outlets are the same size. So, if you want to plug in an American plug which has one slightly larger tip (the grounding tip), you will need a suitable adaptor.

LANGUAGE: Japanese is the national language.

TIME: Japan is on Japan Standard Time (JST) all year and is 13 hours ahead of Eastern Daylight Time (EDT).

INTERNET ACCESS: Wi-Fi is available at all accommodations, though speeds may be slow.

MISCELLANEOUS: Departure Tax - included in ticket price.

HEALTH: Tour participants are advised to contact their physicians for advice regarding medications to prevent seasickness on the pelagic trips. Water is drinkable from the tap everywhere in Japan and it is a very healthy country, with excellent medical services including in rural areas.

VENT follows Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendations for standard travel precautions, which includes vaccination against a variety of preventable diseases. Among these so-called Routine Vaccinations are measles/mumps/rubella (MMR) vaccine, diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus (DPT) vaccine, poliovirus vaccine (boosters for adult travelers), and Varicella (Chickenpox). You should also be up-to-date with Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B vaccinations.

If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

COVID-19: We continually emphasize that our number one priority is the health and safety of our customers and employees. Although VENT no longer maintains any of its COVID-era prevention protocols, we strongly recommend best practices for protecting yourself and your fellow travelers against COVID-19 illness. These measures include receiving the primary series vaccinations for those eligible, staying “Up to Date” with COVID-19 booster shots, wearing high filtration N-95 or KN-95 masks when in airports and on airplanes, and avoiding risky social settings in the lead-up to your tour. These recommendations are firmly rooted in CDC guidance regarding recommendations for avoiding COVID-19. Please visit the **Coronavirus Travel Update** page of our website <https://ventbird.com/covid-19> for our official statement regarding COVID-19 and the operation of our tours. Please visit the CDC website for the most up to date information about COVID-19 and associated guidance for proper health and hygiene: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/index.html>.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers’ Information Line (800) CDC-INFO (800-232-4636). You can check the CDC website at <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel>. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html> (click on Travel Health).

FOOD: Our accommodations cater primarily for Japanese guests. Washoku, the Japanese cuisine, is listed by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of which Japanese chefs are justifiably proud and renowned. They prepare and provide healthy Omakase (chef’s choice) meals, and occasionally buffets (such as for breakfast). The Japanese individual dietary restrictions/preferences cannot be catered for although due consideration may be possible (but not guaranteed) for any life-threatening allergies; however, as food is plentiful this makes it possible to choose to not eat dishes if you so wish. Accommodations cannot cater for vegan, kosher, halal or other dietary restrictions. Simple vegetarian food (i.e. no meat, no seafood) may be possible at one or more of our accommodations.

Lunch restaurants that cater for foreign groups are scarce in east Hokkaidō and they expect rigid adherence to the time of meal reservations. Therefore, on most days of this tour, in order to be flexible with our lunch timings, we will purchase the makings of picnic lunches, giving each participant great personal choice and as a group the opportunity to utilize more of each day.

HOT SPRINGS: Onsen and Omakase dinners are the primary attraction points for most accommodations in Japan, which cater primarily for Japanese guests. The Onsen experience is one not to be missed as it is a key element of Japanese culture, and the only traditional form of therapy. Onsen pools are shared, but segregated;

bathing costumes are not allowed. Thorough washing is done in the ante-room before approaching the bath, which is used only for soaking and relaxation in time-honored fashion. At one of our accommodations (one night only) the only showers are located inside the onsen area.

Biting Insects: There may be some mosquitoes and midges in Hokkaido. Therefore, for prevention of bites, we recommend bringing a stick-type repellent lotion or lotion and a pump-style container of insect repellent that has close to 100% DEET. Topsy gel is useful in reducing irritation from stings or bites, and some cortisone creams are available without prescription.

Insect Repellents – There are insect repellents for the skin and an insect repellent used to treat clothing that should not be applied to the skin.

Insect repellents for the skin are commonly available in three forms:

- DEET (N,N-diethyl-meta-toluamide): A chemical compound that is marketed under various brand names (OFF!®, Cutter™, Ultrathon™, etc.) and offered in a variety of formulations including sprays, lotions, time-release preparations, and disposable wipes. The formulations will state a percentage of the active ingredient DEET on the packaging. DEET may be applied to exposed skin directly and/or sprayed on clothing. Please be careful when applying DEET as it can damage plastics and lens coatings.
- Picaridin: A synthetic formulation that is derived from piperine, a substance found in plants that produce black pepper.
- Herbal insect repellents: Various mixtures of organic ingredients such as oils from eucalyptus, citronella, cedar, and other herbs. The herbal repellents are more difficult to categorize because of the difference in ingredients from one brand to another. There is considerable variation in their effectiveness.

An insect repellent for clothing is marketed in one approved formulation:

- Permanone® (Permethrin) is an odorless spray-on repellent that may be used for **pre-treatment** of clothing, gear, and tents. It should not be used directly on the skin or sprayed on clothing while it is being worn. The pre-treatment process requires a number of hours to complete and must be done outdoors, so is best completed in advance of travel. Do-it-yourself pre-treatment has to be repeated more often than commercial treatment using Insect Shield® technology. It is available at various outdoor stores and can easily be found online.
- Insect Shield® apparel: Clothing pre-treated with Permanone is made by a variety of manufacturers. It is available for purchase from some sporting goods suppliers. The clothing is advertised as retaining its repellency for up to 70 washings.

The US EPA offers a search tool to help choose a repellent that is best for a particular situation. For example, some repellents work for mosquitoes, but not for ticks.

<https://www.epa.gov/insect-repellents/which-insect-repellent-right-you>

If you are taking personal medication, prescription or over-the-counter, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the trip safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication.

*As an added precaution, we can recommend the use of **Insect Shield®** or similarly treated clothing. Insect Shield is a process by which clothing is treated with an EPA-approved formula of the insect repellent permethrin. Such clothing is highly repellent to insects and provides durable and long-lasting protection, even after dozens of washings. Outdoor wear with Insect Shield protection is sold by such brands as Ex Officio and Tilley, available online or in specialized outdoor gear stores. In lieu of Insect Shield clothing, you can treat your clothes with permethrin before packing and travel, which can be equally effective as commercially pre-treated clothing.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, which operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line (800) CDC-INFO (800-232-4636). You can check the CDC website at <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel>. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html> (click on Travel Health).

Sun Exposure: Prolonged exposure to the sun's ultraviolet rays causes damage to eyes and skin. When outdoors, protect skin including nose, ears, and lips. Severe sunburn is potentially painful. Be sure to bring an ample supply of high SPF sunscreen and lip balm. For eye protection, we strongly recommend the use of ultra-violet blocking, polarized sunglasses.

SUGGESTED READING: A number of traditional booksellers and online stores list excellent inventories of field guides and other natural history resources that will help prepare you for this tour. We recommend www.amazon.com which has a wide selection; www.buteobooks.com and www.nhbs.com which specialize in ornithology and natural history books; and www.abebooks.com for used copies of such books, or out-of-print and hard-to-find titles.

Natural History Guides:

Brazil, M. A. Japan — *The Natural History of an Asian Archipelago*. Princeton University Press, January 18, 2022. A comprehensive, richly illustrated guide to Japan's astonishing animals and plants—and the natural forces that have shaped them.

Brazil, M. A. *Wild Hokkaidō: A Guidebook to the National Parks and other Wild Places of Eastern Hokkaidō* Kindle Edition, June 12, 2021

Field Guides (Birds)

Brazil, M. A. *Birds of Japan*. Christopher Helm, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018. An up-to-date publication on the birds of Japan in English. This is the best available guidebook, and it illustrates all the species that we are likely to encounter on this tour. Also available as a digital download. **The recommended field guide for this tour.**

Brazil, M. A. *Birds of East Asia*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009. An up-to-date publication on the birds of east Asia in English. A very useful guidebook which illustrates all the species that we are likely to encounter on this tour.

Brazil, M.A. *A Birdwatchers Guide to Japan*, Japan: Kodansha International, 1987. A detailed site guide with much information relating, in particular, habitat, likely birds, accommodation, and useful information for getting there. Out of print.

Otani, C. *Birds of Japan*. Lynx Edicions, 2019. Highly recommended: An up-to-date publication on the birds of Japan in English. This illustrates all the species that we are likely to encounter on this tour.

Wild Bird Society of Japan. *A Field Guide to the Birds of Japan*. Out of print. A useful, older field guide that illustrates all the species that we are likely to encounter on this tour, though some bird names are out-of-date.

Shimba, T. *A Photographic Guide to the Birds of Japan and East Asia*. London: Christopher Helm, 2007. An up-to-date publication on the birds of Japan in English, a photographic guide.

TIPPING: Tipping (restaurant staff, porters, drivers, local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that tips are not expected and are entirely optional. Tips should be given directly to your tour leader; they should not be sent to the VENT office.

RESPONSIBILITY STATEMENT: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc., a Texas corporation, and/or its agents (together, “**VENT**”) act only as agents for the participant in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the participant or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT accepts no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in airfare or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, terrorism, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will be borne by the participant, as tour rates only provide for arrangements for the time stated.

VENT reserves the right (i) to substitute hotels of similar category, or the best reasonable substitution available under the circumstances, for those indicated and (ii) to make any changes in the itinerary that are deemed necessary by VENT or which are caused by third party transportation schedules (i.e., railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, airplane, etc.).

VENT reserves the right to substitute leaders or guides on any tour. Where VENT, in its sole discretion, determines such substitution is necessary, it will notify tour participants.

VENT reserves the right to cancel any tour prior to departure with or without cause or good reason. See the VENT Cancellation & Refunds policy set forth above.

Tour prices are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect on August 16, 2023, and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change thereto.

VENT reserves the right to decline any participant’s Registration Form and/or refuse to allow any participant to participate in a tour as VENT deems reasonably necessary, in its sole discretion. VENT also reserves the right to remove any tour participant from any portion of a tour as VENT deems necessary, in its sole discretion, reasons for such removal include but are not limited to, medical needs, injury, illness, inability to meet physical demands of a tour, personality conflict or situations in which such removal is otherwise in the best interest of the tour, the tour group and/or such participant. A participant may also voluntarily depart from a tour. If a participant is removed from a tour or voluntarily departs from a tour, such participant will be responsible for any expenses associated with such removal or departure, including but not limited to, transportation, lodging, airfare and meals, and VENT will have no obligation to refund or reimburse any such removed or departed participant for any tour payments or deposits previously paid by such participant.

Baggage is carried at the participant’s risk entirely. No airline company, its employees, agents and/or affiliates (the “**Airline**”) is to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time participants are not on board the Airline’s aircraft. The participant ticket in use by any Airline, when issued, will constitute the sole contract between the Airline and the purchaser of the tickets and/or the participant. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for VENT tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airlines Reporting Corporation.

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