

Japan Winter Wildlife Tours 2024 Part 2



July 12, 2024

Today, I'll walk you through the second half of my Japan Winter Wildlife Tours for 2024, and at the end, we'll hear the comments from the guests on both tours. We finished last week as we ended our time with the Red-Crowned Cranes, and this week, we move on to the Whooper Swans at Kussharo Lake and then to the Steller's Sea Eagles and White-Tailed Eagles around the Rausu fishing port on the eastern side of the Shiretoko Peninsula.



Swan Duo Departs

With the oppressive Japanese summer heat already bearing down on us with full force, it was nice to recall the chill in the air as we worked in the field up in Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island. After photographing the Red-Crowned Cranes, we enjoyed some relaxing shoots with the Whooper Swans. One involves a panning technique that gives us an excellent blurry background and blurry legs and feet on the swans as they run along the water. This photo, from the first of the two tours, shows how we had a bit of color in the sky reflecting in the water. The lake wasn't frozen all the way to shore on this tour, as sometimes happens, but having the lake fully frozen hasn't happened really for a few seasons now.

Nine Swans

I have many shots with one or two birds in, so quite often these days, I try to pull back a little on my zoom, and get more birds in, as you can see in this second photo (following page). There was still a bit of warmth in the sky, but as you can

see there was a mist over the ice where the lake was frozen, adding a nice atmosphere to the shots. I generally adjust my aperture and ISO so that I can set the shutter speed to around a 1/40 or 1/50 of a second, which is a great speed to capture the movement that you see in these shots. We do, of course,

get a lot of images where the birds heads are not sharp, and although they can be pleasing to look at, it's always nice to get a small percentage of images with sharp heads, like these that I'm sharing today.







Platinum Reflection

On the second trip, we had a thin layer of ice that reflected the warmth of the sunset, as you can see in this third panning image of a single Whooper Swan. I shot all of these with my Canon RF 100-500mm lens, and the focal lengths used range from 128mm for the first and second images and 186mm for this shot.



Swans Arrive

We also visited the lake straight after an early breakfast in the hope of catching some groups flying in, and we were lucky enough to get just that on a few mornings. This is my favorite example image of such a fly-in. I like to include the line of trees to the right of the beach at Sunayu, where we shoot, and on this morning we were treated to a little snow, which I always enjoy.

Snowy Landing

A little later, I got this shot of a pair of swans landing in the snow together, with their wings still held out, in a breaking position, and the snow being kicked up around their feet as they touched down. I like the dynamic feel of this shot. They went on to honk at each other while bowing their heads, and I have some nice shots of that, too, but we need to move on to the sea eagles, so here goes.





White-Tailed Eagle Takes Fish

I love capturing the sea eagles catching the fish that we throw out for them from the water, causing this kind of splash. I sometimes accidentally cut off the wing tips, but I enjoy getting them cropped this tightly in the camera rather than pulling back and cropping the image later. I crop some photos, especially when the birds are further away, and my zoom won't enable me to fill the frame with them, but this kind of close shot is very satisfying to achieve without a crop in post.

Eagles Trading Places

One morning, we had some nice formations in the sea ice, and I was lucky enough to get this shot of two Steller's Sea Eagles trading places on top of this pinnacle of ice, with a splash of blue in its shadow. A third eagle was sitting lower on the ice to the left, but he was a bit distracting, so I cloned him out in Capture One Pro. People often ask how much of my processing I do in Capture One Pro instead of jumping into Photoshop, and are sometimes surprised to learn that I do almost all of my processing in Capture One Pro. I may take one out of a few thousand final selects into Photoshop, so it's less than 0.1 percent. That is one of the big attractions to me as I can keep my images in their original raw format. Of course, the fact that the image quality is head-and-shoulders above Lightroom is the main reason I continue to use Capture One Pro.



Eagle Fists

I also enjoy it when we get an eagle flying straight towards our boat, especially when they are making fists, like this one, who looks like he's simply flying around looking for a fight.





Eagle Rising

This next eagle was banking on the ice holding him afloat more than it did, and sunk more than expected as he reached for the fish. I love the water streaming off the fish in this shot. I have three or four more frames of him actually rising out of the water, but this is my favorite because of that water running off the fish.

Snow, Sand and Tetrapods

While we are in Rausu for the sea eagles, we drive down the Notsuke Peninsula most afternoons and we were treated to some nice patterns made by the wind-blown snow and black sand on the beach there. The wind blew through the tetrapods, forming beautiful patterns that looked almost like cream melting into coffee in a TV commercial. I rarely share non-wildlife images from this trip, but I couldn't resist doing so with this shot.

OK, so that's our ten images, but now I will play you the comments from both groups, that I recorded as we ended each tour. I have never had to wait this long to create the travelogue episodes from my tours, so it was a real trip down memory lane to listen to these fine people again as I prepared this episode.

<< LISTEN WITH THE AUDIO PLAYER ON THE BLOG TO FIND OUT WHAT EACH OF THE PARTICIPANTS HAD TO SAY ABOUT THE TOUR >>

Wow! What amazing people. It was so much fun to travel with these folks. I hope to do so again at some point. If you'd like to join me on one of my tours, please check availability on our Tours page. In the next episode, I'll probably start to walk you through my Namibia Tour which I rant in May, and then we'll start to get into some of the other things I'm up to since moving to our new home in the Gunma Prefecture.



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