

Hokkaido Winter Wildlife

8 Day Photography Tour



Join us for an adventure around East Hokkaido on this photography tour. With your camera in hand, you'll capture incredible shots of Red-crowned Cranes, Steller's Sea Eagles and other charming creatures emblematic of Hokkaido's magical winter.

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[**View Gallery**](#)

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About the Tour

Start	Finish	Grading	Season
Abashiri	Kushiro	Enthusiast Photography	February

About Japan's Far East

Hokkaido's far east region is often described as the last unexplored frontier of Japan. This region is popular for wildlife and outdoor lovers in the summer. It is also renowned internationally in winter as a bird-watching and wildlife photography destination.

On this tour, we will visit some of Hokkaido's beautiful national parks to capture amazing shots of some of the best wildlife the region has to offer. We will watch the world's heaviest eagle soar overhead, marvel at the dancing cranes and see deer silhouetted against the setting sun.

Bundled up warm and with your camera in hand, we'll make sure that you take plenty of shots that will take pride of place in your portfolio. Join us for an incredible photography adventure in Hokkaido's magical winter!

Tour highlights

- Take photos of Whooper Swans up close on the shores of Lake Kussharo.
- Take a nature cruise off the Rausu coast, with the chance to photograph Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles.
- Visit the Notsuke Peninsula, a Ramsar Site to photograph Japanese Deer and Red Foxes.
- Photograph Japan's cultural icon, the Red-crowned Crane, performing its famous "dance".
- Enjoy the expertise and guidance of a professional Hokkaido-based photography guide.

Who is this tour for?

- Experienced enthusiast, amateur or professional wildlife photographers who are willing to spend hours in difficult winter conditions to get the perfect shot.
- Curious photographers who enjoy a mixture of activities and sightseeing and learning about the regions they visit.
- Adventurous travellers who enjoy rural hospitality, staying in Japanese style accommodations with natural hot springs on site.

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Itinerary at a glance

Day	Activities	Meals ¹
1	Meet your group in Abashiri	D ▾
2	Photography at Lake Tofutsu & Lake Kussharo	B, D ▾
3	Photography at Lake Furen & Transfer to Yoroushi Onsen	B, D ▾
4	Photography on the Notsuke Peninsula & Transfer to Rausu Shiretoko	B, D ▾
5	Pre-Dawn Nature Cruise in Rausu Shiretoko & Optional Evening Photography	B, D ▾
6	Pre-Dawn Nature Cruise in Rausu Shiretoko & Photography in Tsurui	B, L, D ▾
7	Photography in Tsurui	B, L, D ▾
8	Transfer to Kushiro & Farewells	B ▾

Accommodation

Day	Type	Location	Ensuite Toilet	Ensuite Shower	Onsen	Laundry
1	Hotel ▾	Abashiri	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Ryokan ▾ ²	Kawayu Onsen	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Ryokan ▾	Yoroushi Onsen	✓		✓	✓
4	Lodge ▾	Rausu Shiretoko	✓	✓		
5	Lodge ▾	Rausu Shiretoko	✓	✓		
6	Hotel ▾	Tsurui	✓	✓	✓	
7	Hotel ▾	Tsurui	✓	✓	✓	

We may change the facility options if our preferred accommodation is unavailable.

¹ B = Breakfast, L = Lunch, D = Dinner

² Ryokan is a traditional Japanese inn.

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Travel style

While we will stick to the wildlife included in this itinerary as much as possible, the small size of this tour allows us to travel in a compact vehicle, stopping easily whenever we get a surprise chance to see wildlife. We will often be outdoors in subzero temperatures for hours at a time before returning to the van and travelling to the next stop. While it is cold outside, it will be warm in the van and indoors. This makes it easy to warm back up, but makes good layering important – make sure you check the packing list and ensure you bring an appropriate outer layer for this tour. Your luggage and photography gear that you don't plan on using will stay in our van, freeing you up to enjoy the day's adventure with only the lenses and other gear that you need in the moment.

Do I need to be a professional photographer to join?

We welcome professionals and amateurs alike on this tour! However, this photography tour is **not for beginners or casual photographers**. This is mostly due to the harsh winter conditions we will encounter and will stay in over several hours to make sure everyone gets the perfect shot. Additionally, while your guide will be happy to offer advice on how to capture a certain shot or angle, they will not have the time to teach you how to use your camera, lens or tripod on this tour. We ask that all participants at least own their own camera and understand how it works.

What kind of camera or lenses do I need to join?

You definitely won't need the best camera going to join this tour! However, **smartphone cameras or compact digital cameras are not suitable for this tour. You will need a DSLR or mirrorless camera with a detachable lens function**. It does not matter what make or how new or old your camera is, just as long as you fully understand how to use it for wildlife photography. Even film cameras are fine on this tour, if you have the right focal length! While not essential, weather-sealed cameras and lenses are highly recommended to keep out Hokkaido's snow. As for lenses, we recommend a focal range of at least 200mm, but 300mm–600mm will give you better versatility and will allow you to capture some more interesting shots. Please see the packing list for more information on what to bring with you on this tour.

Adverse weather

While we try to organise everything, mother nature is out of our control. If the weather is too bad to photograph (such as during a snowstorm) we will travel to the next inn in our support vehicle. Along the way we will still stop at local restaurants and visit indoor facilities, so you can still experience the charm of the area while travelling safely and comfortably.

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What's included

- 7 nights accommodation on a twin share basis
- 7 breakfasts, 2 lunches and 7 dinners
- 2 marine wildlife watching cruises in Rausu Shiretoko
- All transport as described in the itinerary
- Professional Japanese photographer guide
- English speaking Adventure Hokkaido representative

What's not included

- Cameras, tripods, lenses, lens filters (please bring your own gear!)
- Airfare
- Entry fee of ¥4,000 for an optional visit to the Blakiston's Fish Owl observatory
- Travel insurance
- Personal expenses
- Drinks with included meals

When do you run this tour?

We run this tour in February only. Hokkaido's midwinter is the only time of the year when we have the best chance of seeing the drift ice – and therefore, enjoying the related wildlife visitors! Please keep in mind that the appearance of drift ice is of course dependent on currents and wind direction. Additionally, while the wildlife included in this tour appear fairly reliably throughout the season, please remember that they are wild animals and there is no guarantee that we will see them. We may turn up to a location to find the wildlife is too far away for our lenses – or simply that there is no wildlife! If this is the case, we will try changing location to see if we have better luck elsewhere but please understand that factors outside of our control (such as weather or a lack of food) can affect the appearance rates of wildlife.

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What makes wildlife photography in Hokkaido special?

Diversity and Reliability

Despite being an island, there is a plethora of wildlife to enjoy photographing in Hokkaido. From migratory birds to massive marine mammals, pint-sized pikas to predatory giants like the Brown Bear. There is something to please every photographer here in Hokkaido. What's more, a lot of the animals and birds to photograph here appear fairly reliably in the same, easily-accessible locations every year.

Unique in the World

Many of Hokkaido's most beloved animals can only be seen in this part of the world. Take the Blakiston's Fish Owl, for example, which is known to reside year-round only in Hokkaido, Sakhalin, Siberia and northern China. Hokkaido remains one of the more easily-accessible places to visit to photograph these stunning birds and many other species besides.

Hot Springs & Warm Welcomes

It may be cold outside but step into one of Hokkaido's many cosy restaurants or lodges, and you are greeted with a warm local welcome. Tuck into a bowl of world-famous Hokkaido ramen or a local hot pot. Later, slip into a steaming hot spring to warm up your body and soothe your cold hands. For a truly unique winter experience, brave the dash through the snow to the "rotenburo" outdoor pool.

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How to book this tour?

We will send you a link to our online sign up form, where we ask for the travel information of all the members travelling with you.

Once we receive this, we will send you a payment link for your tour deposit, which is JPY 50,000 per person. **We will confirm your booking upon receipt of your deposit payment.**

The deposit is treated as a part of the tour price. Payment of the balance will be reminded by email, which is generally 5 weeks prior to the tour departure date.

We accept payment via **Wise** or **Flywire**. We will send you payment links for both options, and you must use one of the payment links provided by us.

Wise payments are available in Japanese Yen only and require you to have a Wise account (Wise-to-Wise transfer only). You must pay any currency exchange or transfer fees yourself.

Flywire payments allow credit card payment or domestic bank transfer converted to your home currency. Credit card payments via Flywire incur an additional service charge of 1.5%, while domestic bank transfers via Flywire do not incur this service charge.

By paying for a deposit or full amount, you confirm that you have read, understand and agree to these [Terms and Conditions](#).

What is the minimum group size for this tour?

This is a mixed group tour and **we accept bookings for this tour from one person up**. However, our scheduled group tours require a minimum number of bookings for us to guarantee the departure of the tour, and to offer the tour at the price quoted. **The minimum number of booked guests to guarantee this tour is four people.**

If you book with less than four people, we will hold your place on the tour and wait for another group to join the tour. If the number of guests has not reached the minimum number by 60 days prior to departure, we will give you the option to cancel or to upgrade to a private departure.

If you choose to cancel, we will refund the amount in Japanese Yen that you have paid us. You're welcome to check with us at any time about the status of bookings.

Please be advised that we will not be liable to compensate for any inconvenience or incidental expenses that might have incurred to you, including airline tickets.

Single Supplement

Our tours are priced on a twin share basis. Those travelling by themselves will need to pay an additional supplement for use of a single room. If you are happy to share a room with another guest – of the same gender – then let us know at the time of booking. If we match you with another solo traveller then we can discount the single supplement for both of you.

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Travel Insurance

All guests joining our tours are required to have travel insurance. Please make sure you have a valid travel insurance, covering the kind of activities you are undertaking during our tour, cancellations, loss of personal belongings, and any unforeseen circumstances while travelling.

Travel to the Meeting Point

We will meet at 6:00 pm at our hotel in Central Abashiri. The closest airport is Abashiri Memanbetsu (MMB) and you can fly directly there from Tokyo Haneda (HND), Tokyo Narita (NRT), Sapporo New Chitose (CTS) and Sapporo Okadama (OKD).

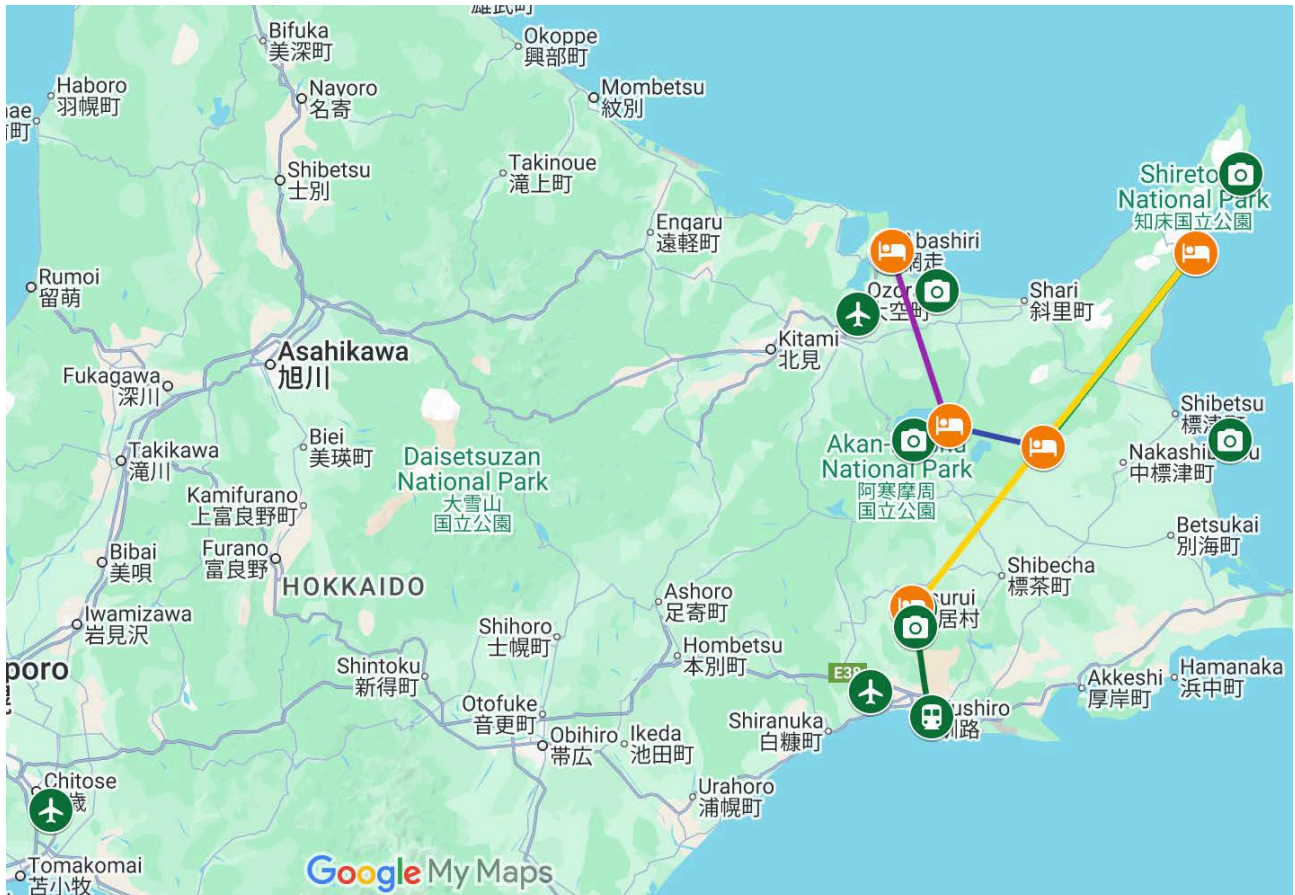
From Abashiri Memanbetsu Airport, airport shuttles depart for central Abashiri with the arrival of every domestic flight. The shuttle takes 26 mins from the Airport to JR Abashiri Station, and costs ¥1,050 per person. Our hotel is within walking distance of the station.

Alternatively, you can take a JR train from Sapporo to Abashiri if you prefer. It takes 5.5 hours and costs just over ¥10,000 for a non-reserved seat.

You can search train timetables in English on [Japan Transit Planner website](#).

Tour map

To view the route on Google My Maps, [click here](#).



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Day to Day Itinerary

Day 1 – Meet your group in Abashiri

We will meet at our hotel at 6:00 pm near JR Abashiri Station in Abashiri, the largest city on Hokkaido’s eastern Sea of Okhotsk coast. Once everyone is gathered, we will spend some time getting to know each other and introducing the programme for our upcoming adventure before we set off for dinner in downtown Abashiri. For those who aren’t used to walking on icy roads, we will introduce you to the penguin-walking technique! There will be time after dinner to get your gear and photography set up in advance of tomorrow.

Meals	Accommodation
D	Hotel in Abashiri

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Day 2 – Photography at Lake Tofutsu & Lake Kussharo

We'll have breakfast at the hotel before we head to Lake Tofutsu, a Ramsar Site just outside of Abashiri and a popular destination for migrating Whooper Swans, stopping over in Hokkaido on their journey south from Siberia. We can experience photography in Hokkaido's frigid conditions, here, to let your body know what it will be in for later on tour!



Next, we'll pick up something to eat for a picnic lunch before we head south to Lake Kussharo, for a chance to photograph the birds at closer quarters. Along the way, we will stop at Bihoro Pass to enjoy an astonishing aerial view of Lake Kussharo if the weather is fair and to allow you to flex your landscape photography muscles too!

Lake Kussharo, found in the Akan–Mashu National Park, is the largest caldera lake in Japan. In winter, nearly all of the lake's surface is frozen, save for some parts of the shore where hot spring water bubbles up from underground and warms the sand itself. The migrating swans flock to these points for a warming soak!

Once we've enjoyed the swans, we will head for tonight's accommodation in Kawayu Onsen. You'll have a chance to relax this evening and experience the natural hot springs at your lodgings.

Meals	Main Subject	Accommodation
B, D	Whooper Swan	Ryokan in Kawayu Onsen

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Day 3 – Photography at Lake Furen & Transfer to Yoroushi Onsen

After breakfast at our inn in Kawayu Onsen, we begin our journey east. If the weather is clear, we'll detour to Lake Mashu to appreciate its beauty and look for eagles soaring overhead. If the group is interested, we can also stop at Suigo Park in Teshikaga town—a winter haven for waterfowl including Whooper Swans. This offers excellent opportunities to photograph both these seasonal visitors and the small birds flitting among the trees.



We'll have lunch before arriving at Lake Furen, a brackish lake on Hokkaido's eastern coast and a major resting site for migratory swans. In winter, the frozen lake becomes a stage for traditional ice fishing—a method practiced here for over 100 years. Birds of prey gather to feed on fish remnants, offering excellent opportunities to photograph them in action. Red Foxes and Japanese Deer are also commonly spotted here.

Before dark, we'll head to Yoroushi Onsen, where you can rest, edit photos or soak in the hot springs until dinner.

This evening offers another photography opportunity. After all, it's not just hot spring visitors who come to Yoroushi Onsen—Blakiston's Fish Owls occasionally visit to feed in the river behind our lodging. The world's largest owl, revered as *kotan kor kamui* (guardian of the village) by the Ainu, Hokkaido's indigenous people, they make for a unique photography subject. While there's no guarantee the owls will appear, the hotel has a comfortable viewing lounge where you can relax on sofas while you wait.

If they show up, the large windows let you photograph them from indoors. However, the windows reflect easily, so you'll definitely need a CPL for the best shots.

Meals	Main Subject	Accommodation
B, D	White-tailed Eagle Blakiston's Fish Owl	Ryokan in Yoroushi Onsen

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Day 4 – Photography on the Notsuke Peninsula & Transfer to Rausu Shiretoko

Our accommodation has a number of bird feeders and food platforms to feed local wildlife, so as you enjoy breakfast this morning, keep your camera handy – it's a chance to enjoy some bonus photography!



After breakfast, we'll head to the Notsuke Peninsula, another Ramsar site. This is actually a very large sand spit sticking out into the icy Nemuro Strait and provides a unique ecosystem home to all kinds of wildlife, including many herds of deer, picking their way across the peninsula's frozen surface and chilly sands. Red Foxes often make an appearance here too, as do both Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles.

We'll spend the afternoon photographing here, breaking for lunch at Notsuke – giving you plenty of time to capture your dream shot. As the light fades, you'll have a chance to photograph the deer silhouetted against the orange sky. If you are lucky, as darkness begins to fall, you may be able to catch a few shots of some owl species such as the Short-eared Owl and Ural Owl. Once we've enjoyed ourselves, we'll depart for our accommodation in Rausu Shiretoko.

Renowned for its kombu seaweed and sea urchins, the peculiar submarine topography makes Rausu a prosperous fishing town. Its position in the ocean – facing the Nemuro Strait, the Kuril Islands and the Kamchatka Peninsula – makes it conveniently close to the breeding sites for a number of special birds, hence their prevalence in the area! We'll have time to relax a little before dinner. After dinner, enjoy a restful night in preparation for tomorrow's pre-dawn cruise.

Meals	Main Subject	Accommodation
B, D	Japanese Deer, Red Fox	Lodge in Rausu Shiretoko

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Day 5 – Pre-dawn nature cruise in Rausu Shiretoko & Optional Evening Photography

We'll be up before dawn today so that we can set out on a nature cruise among the ice floes. If we are lucky we will see White-tailed Eagles and Brunnich's Guillemots, in addition to the star of the show, the majestic Steller's Sea Eagle. Our boat is a small, charter boat that will put us on the same eye level with these incredible creatures and will allow us to closely approach the drift ice.



The cruise lasts for about an hour and a half and you will be on the cold water's surface with no shelter for all of this time, so suitable, warm layers are non-negotiable. You will be left ashore if you are under-dressed!

Please note that the cruise may not operate depending on drift ice, ocean and weather conditions. If the cruise is cancelled due to weather or waves, we will try again tomorrow.

After returning to our accommodation for breakfast, there will be some time to explore Rausu, empty SD cards or catch up on sleep. For those interested in revisiting the Notsuke Peninsula for another chance to photograph wildlife, we'll gather and make the one-hour drive from Rausu. Wildlife behaves and appears differently depending on weather conditions and time of day, so you never know what photography opportunities might present themselves – they are often quite different from the previous day. In the evening, we'll reunite for dinner at your accommodation.

This evening, you have the option of visiting a nearby Blakiston's Fish Owl observatory to photograph this amazing animal. Note that it is impossible to know if and when the owls will turn up, so you may be in for a long wait and you may also want to prepare yourself for disappointment. Entry times to the observatory are strictly regulated to keep the environment suitable for the owls. If you do wish to join your guide for this opportunity, you will need to pay the entry fee of ¥4,000 yourself on the day. The entry time is just before sunset, which means you'll also have to skip tonight's included dinner and pay for a later dinner yourself if you wish. Visitors are free to leave the observatory as long as the owl is not present, but of course we'll have to reach the decision of when we leave as a group!

Meals	Main Subject	Accommodation
B, D	Steller's Sea Eagle, Blakiston's Fish Owl	Lodge in Rausu Shiretoko

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Day 6 – Pre-dawn Nature Cruise in Rausu Shiretoko & Photography in Tsurui

This morning, we have another opportunity to head out at dawn to photograph Steller's Sea Eagles. Today's cruise also serves as our back-up if yesterday's cruise was cancelled. Feel free to opt out of this morning's cruise if you're already happy with your eagle photos (no refund will be given), but if you didn't get any satisfactory shots yesterday, you're welcome to come along and give it another go!

After the cruise, we will return to our accommodation for breakfast and after checking out of our accommodation, we will make our way to Tsurui, the final destination on this tour.

Tsurui is famous for the successful recovery of Red-crowned Cranes. Their population has rebounded to over 1,200 birds in the area surrounding Tsurui, with a reasonably high chance to see one even from the main roads.

We will visit the Ito Tancho Sanctuary this afternoon to photograph the cranes and to enjoy their magnificent "dances", an affectionate display these beautiful birds perform to bond with each other ahead of the breeding season. The sanctuary feeds the birds a managed amount of food in the winter and this daily feeding contributes to conservation efforts. Given that there is plentiful food in the warmer months, they are not fed during the rest of the year. We will try to coincide our visit with their afternoon feeding time when the cranes become quite active.

After spending a good few hours at the crane sanctuary, we will head to our lodging for the evening. We can warm up at our accommodation this evening with a delicious meal and prepare ourselves for our final early rise tomorrow!

Meals	Main Subject	Accommodation
B, L, D	Red-crowned Crane	Hotel in Tsurui



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Day 7 – Photography in Tsurui

This morning we will make our way to a local bridge. As soon as we arrive, you'll notice that there are a lot of keen photographers already set up and waiting!

The river below is where the cranes roost overnight and as the first light warms their feathers, they'll take flight to head out to their feeding grounds for today. You may also be able to spot other wildlife here, such as owls returning to roost, eagles heading out to hunt and deer fording the river. It will be very cold on the bridge, so it's a good idea to wear the same clothes you wore on the eagle cruise.



Depending on the day's weather conditions, after observing the cranes from the bridge, we will follow them back to Ito Tancho Sanctuary. On sunny and chilly mornings, the red crest on their heads can flare brightly, so we'll stay there for the rest of the morning enjoying this dazzling (literally) opportunity! If the weather is cloudy or snowy however, then after we leave the bridge we'll head back to the hotel to enjoy a quick breakfast before returning to Ito Tancho Sanctuary to photograph the birds at our leisure.

After finishing up at the sanctuary, we'll head for a local lunch and of course, we'll keep our ears open for any local photography opportunities just in case you want to get one last shot! Ural Owls and the cranes flying in to roost are both potential photo opportunities today. If you are already happy with all your shots and would rather opt out of the afternoon's photography, that's not a problem and your guide will be happy to drop you at your accommodation after lunch.

Tonight, we'll enjoy our final dinner together to celebrate the memorable experiences we've shared on this tour.

Meals	Main Subject	Accommodation
B, L, D	Red-crowned Crane	Hotel in Tsurui

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Day 8 – Transfer to Kushiro & Farewells

Today, you'll have one last chance to enjoy photography of the cranes at Otowa Bridge. After finishing up, we will have breakfast at our lodging this morning and then drive for about 1 hour to Kushiro City to complete the tour.

We can drop you off at either Kushiro JR Station or Kushiro Airport between 10 am and 11 am.

Make sure you've not left any lens caps or filters on the bus before you depart and have a safe trip to your next destination!

Meals	
B	

Our recommended reading

[Hokkaido Wildlife Guide](#)

[What to pack for Hokkaido?](#)

[How to Dress for Hokkaido's Winter](#)

[How to onsen \(like a local!\)](#)

[A Local's Guide on What to Expect When Staying in Hokkaido](#)

[A Local's Guide to Photography in Hokkaido](#)

[Hokkaido Travel Tips & Common Questions](#)