

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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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 and Lake Kussharo	B, D ▾
3	Photography on the Notsuke Peninsula & Transfer to Rausu	B, D ▾
4	Pre-Dawn Nature Cruise in Rausu Shiretoko	B, D ▾
5	Pre-Dawn Nature Cruise in Rausu Shiretoko & Transfer to Yoroushi Onsen	B, D ▾
6	Transfer to Tsurui & 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	Lodge ▾	Lake Kussharo	✓	✓	✓	✓
3	Minshuku ▾	Rausu Shiretoko				
4	Minshuku ▾	Rausu Shiretoko				
5	Ryokan ▾ ²	Yoroushi Onsen	✓		✓	✓
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 guided 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 if possible 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 an invoice 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, which you can use to send payment directly to ourselves (you don't need to create a Wise or Flywire account to send the funds). When paying via Wise, payment is available in Japanese Yen only, and you must pay any currency exchange or transfer fees by yourself.

For credit card payment or domestic bank transfer converted to your own currency, we use Flywire, which will incur an additional transaction fee of 1.5%.

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).

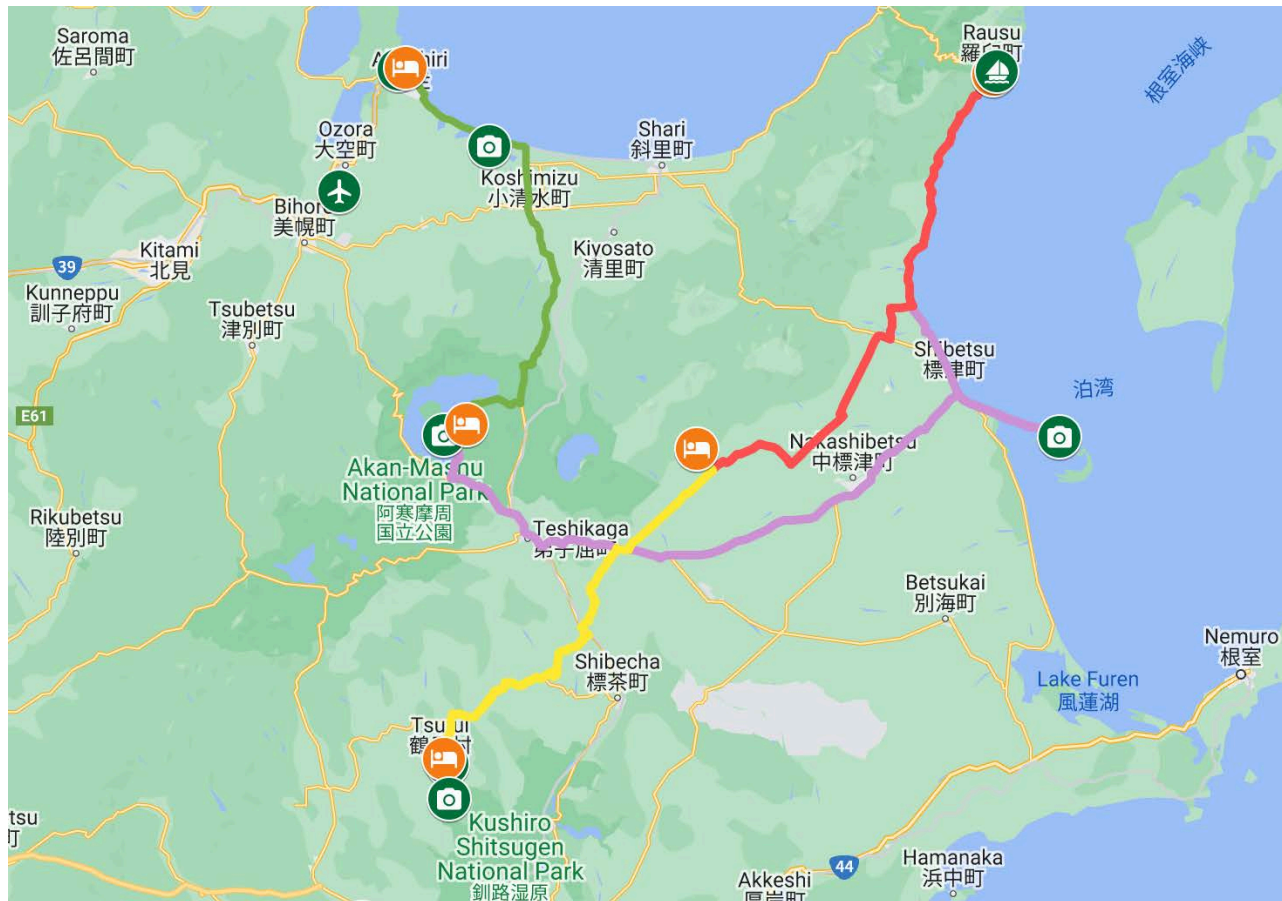
From Abashiri Memanbetsu Airport, airport shuttles depart for central Abashiri with the arrival of every domestic flight. The shuttle takes 26 mins from the Airport to JR Abashiri Station, and costs ¥1,050 per person. Our hotel is within walking distance of the station.

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. The lakeside lodge we'll be staying at is owned by a couple who love wild animals and their garden is adorned with many bird feeders. This will give you plenty of opportunities to photograph some of Hokkaido's forest birds, such as Eurasian Nuthatches, woodpeckers or the Long-tailed Tit. If we are lucky, small mammals like Eurasian Red Squirrels may even make an appearance!

Meals	Main Subject	Accommodation
B, D	Whooper Swan	Lodge at Lake Kussharo

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Day 3 – Photography on the Notsuke Peninsula & Transfer to Rausu

After one more chance to photograph the birds and animals gathering around our accommodation's feeders in the morning, we'll begin our long drive to Rausu on the Shiretoko Peninsula. Along the way, we'll make a stop for lunch.

After lunch, we will 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.



Today, we'll be raising our lenses ready for some of Hokkaido's famous mammals. The peninsula is home to 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 will spend the afternoon here so you'll have plenty of opportunity 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.

As the sun disappears below the ocean, we'll hop back in our van and continue our journey to 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 dinner upon arrival at our accommodation, after which it's time for an early night in preparation for our pre-dawn cruise tomorrow.

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

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Day 4 – Pre-dawn nature cruise in Rausu Shiretoko

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, you can enjoy the rest of the day at leisure to explore Rausu, empty SD cards or catch up on sleep. In the evening, we will reunite to have dinner together served at your accommodation.

This evening, you have the option of visiting a nearby Blakiston's Fish Owl observatory to photograph this amazing animal. The owl is known as *kotan kor kamui* in the language of the Ainu, Hokkaido's indigenous people, and was believed to be a guardian of villages and settlements. The largest owl in the world, it is quite a unique photography experience - though 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, please be aware that 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	Minshuku in Rausu Shiretoko

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Day 5 – Pre-dawn nature cruise in Rausu Shiretoko & Transfer to Yoroushi Onsen

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 to catch up on sleep 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 enjoy a little more time photographing wildlife on the Notsuke Peninsula before travelling on to Yoroushi Onsen, where you can spend the rest of the afternoon resting, editing or enjoying the warming hot springs before, possibly, another photography opportunity this evening.

Afterall, it's not just hot spring visitors who come to Yoroushi Onsen – a couple of Blakiston's Fish Owls visit from time to time to feed in the river running behind our hotel. As before, there's no guarantee that the owls will show but fortunately, the hotel has a comfortable viewing lounge where you can relax on sofas while you stay up and wait for their visit.

Alternatively, you can ask hotel staff to telephone your room when the owls arrive. If they show up, the large windows let you photograph them from the warm indoors. The windows are prone to reflections however, so you will definitely need a CPL for the best shots.

Meals	Main Subject	Accommodation
B, D	Steller's Sea Eagle	Ryokan in Yoroushi Onsen

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Day 6 – Photography in Tsurui

After a late check-out from 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 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

Our last sunrise on this tour will see us 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 dinner together to celebrate the end of our tour and to say our goodbyes before we all go our separate ways tomorrow.

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](#)