



Field Guides Tour Report

Japan in Spring 2019

May 21, 2019 to Jun 7, 2019

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For our tour description, itinerary, past triplists, dates, fees, and more, please [VISIT OUR TOUR PAGE](#).



We had a wonderful day to explore the region around the iconic peak of Mount Fuji, and we found some great birds there. Photo by participant John Keith.

This was the inaugural Field Guides Japan in Spring tour, a nice pairing with the popular winter trip and getting to some lovely and less familiar destinations like the Ryukyu and Izu Islands. The logistics worked well, with good vehicles, the flights more or less on time and the boat trips both good, whilst the hotels ranged from fit for purpose to very nice.

The start on Shikoku was a bit disappointing as the Fairy Pitta was horribly uncooperative and ended up being heard only on the second day. Still, the weather was good and there were oddments like Ashy Minivet, Dollarbird and Red-rumped Swallow for diversion.

Then it was back and up to the beautiful Mt Fuji area, what a backdrop this spectacular peak makes. Good birds here included Gray Nightjar, Japanese Leaf Warbler, Brown-headed and Japanese thrushes, Red-flanked Bluetail, Siberian Blue Robin, Narcissus Flycatcher, Chestnut-cheeked Starling and Japanese Yellow Bunting.

Our overnight trip out to Miyakejima on the large ferry boat was great, with very nice cabins both ways and reasonable weather, and leaving the big bags at the hotel near the quay in Tokyo. Despite a strong wind on the island we saw Izu (Japanese) Robin, Izu Thrush, Ijima's Leaf Warbler and eventually Owston's Tit, and amazingly Pleske's Grasshopper Warbler was perched up and singing, with a bonus Japanese Wood Pigeon nearby. Not bad for a morning's birding, though the sea trip back could only yield Streaked Shearwater and nothing out of the ordinary.

The Ryukyu Islands came next, and the lovely island of Amami was very rewarding, with superb views of Amami Woodcock in the road, Amami (Owston's) Woodpecker, the gorgeous Lidth's Jay, good views and marvelous flute-like vocals from Whistling Green Pigeon, good vocals and brief looks at Amami Thrush, and a highly successful spotlighting outing, with Amami Black Rabbit, Ryukyu Scops Owl and Northern Boobook. An inaugural duel with the elusive Japanese Paradise Flycatcher also featured.

Okinawa was next, and the Okinawa Rail proved easy to get this time; we saw 15 in one morning. The mongoose busters program here and on Amami really looks to be paying dividends- they employ 40 people on the latter island and have something like 10,000 traps set up! The very rare Okinawa Woodpecker was also very kind to us, with two flying right in front of the car at the rail site, then nice views of pair later, with the male drumming. A

visit to the giant rail statue was interesting. It is located in a lovely coastal area with the strikingly distinctive local Okinawan tombs (a couple with their own private beach!). Various butterflies proved diverting here in the subtropics too. Our spotlighting gave us roosting Whistling Green Pigeon and a large habu snake, also the very small taxon of wild boar that occurs in the Ryukyus. Heavy rain the next night spotlighting produced a couple of nice frogs and a piglet.

From Okinawa we flew north to Hokkaido, a very exciting part of the tour and such a contrast to the deep frozen Arctic winter season here. Red-crowned Cranes were easily seen, including a pair with juvenile, and the wonderful Blakiston's Fish Owl cooperated very well with superb looks at a female fishing in the pond. Surprise birds included a fine Lesser-spotted Woodpecker, a male Pine Grosbeak and good views of Black-browed Reed Warbler. The *Locustella* Grasshopper-warblers are renowned skulkers in the main, but here we saw Middendorff's and Lanceolated very well indeed, with only the Sakhalin Grasshopper-Warbler being elusive; I am just pleased it had arrived, as this is a late migrant. Sakhalin Leaf Warbler came good, as did Japanese Robin, whilst a Siberian Rubythroat male at Notsuke was one of the trip highlights for most.

The boat trip off Ochiishi was good for close views of Spectacled Guillemot, Ancient Murrelet and Rhinoceros Auklet. Red-faced Cormorant was seen and identified from the photos, and Sea Otter is always a pleasure to find. Butterflies were relatively few, but the plants added a nice extra dimension; that giant butterbur is everywhere. Thanks to John for his enthusiasm and knowledge here.

All in all, a fine inaugural trip and we can fine tune it for 2020, our thanks to everyone for participating and being good company, to Melissa for sharing her scope and spotting so well, and of course to Jun for being driver-guide and interpreting the many mystifying aspects of Japanese culture. We enjoyed some lovely meals in the course of the trip, and 7/11's, Family Mart and Lawson Station proved popular for those early breakfasts and some lunches. Thanks to Karen at FG HQ for overseeing the tour, and to Sue and Rowan Gregory at Sicklebill Safaris for setting up the program, a fine job all round.

Why not sign up for an exciting trip in 2020 in a beautiful and incredibly well organized part of the world?

Note: IBC means Internet Bird Collection, a free access site related to Handbook of Birds of the WorldAlive and featuring thousands of photos, videos and recordings including many from Phils' trips. XC is xeno-canto, the major site for sound recordings, also free access and again with many cuts from Phils' trips.

KEYS FOR THIS LIST

One of the following keys may be shown in brackets for individual species as appropriate: * = heard only, I = introduced, E = endemic, N = nesting, a = austral migrant, b = boreal migrant

BIRDS

Anatidae (Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl)

MUTE SWAN (*Cygnus olor*) – A pair with 3 cygnets were by the boats on Lake Yamanaka. [I]

EURASIAN WIGEON (*Mareca penelope*) – About 120 around Notsuke and Odaito.

AMERICAN WIGEON (*Mareca americana*) – A single drake in breeding dress was with the Eurasian Wigeon and Pintail at Odaito; rare but regular in Japan.

EASTERN SPOT-BILLED DUCK (*Anas zonorhyncha*) – Just a pair at Narita Creek this trip.

MALLARD (*Anas platyrhynchos*) – A couple of sightings from Hokkaido, with a drake at Teshikaga lake and 2 at Kiritappu meadow.

NORTHERN PINTAIL (*Anas acuta*) – 8 late migrants at Odaito on Hokkaido.

TUFTED DUCK (*Aythya fuligula*) – A flock of about 15 on the sea near Odaito.

GREATER SCAUP (*Aythya marila*) – 5 at Odaito and 4 at Ochiishi harbor, quite late for them here.

HARLEQUIN DUCK (*Histrionicus histrionicus*) – 3 female plumage birds on rocks at sea off Ochiishi were unexpected.

Phasianidae (Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies)

CHINESE BAMBOO-PARTRIDGE (*Bambusicola thoracicus*) – Heard from Shikoku and on Miyake, and Melissa and Joyce saw one at Narita pre-tour. [I*]

RING-NECKED PHEASANT (GREEN) (*Phasianus colchicus versicolor*) – Heard in Fujionoya early one morning. [E*]

Podicipedidae (Grebes)

RED-NECKED GREBE (*Podiceps grisegena grisegena*) – One in partial summer plumage off Notsuke was unexpected and very pleasing to Melissa, who knows them well.

Columbidae (Pigeons and Doves)

ROCK PIGEON (*Columba livia*) – A few in the urban centers. [I]

JAPANESE WOOD-PIGEON (*Columba janthina janthina*) – Calling at the Miyake Nature Centre but stayed hidden, then one perched up nicely despite the strong winds at Cape Izu. Quite a rare bird and not easy to see.

ORIENTAL TURTLE-DOVE (*Streptopelia orientalis orientalis*) – The default dove, seen most days. The Ryukyu birds are darker and belong to another race, *stimpsoni*.

WHITE-BELLIED PIGEON (*Treron sieboldii sieboldii*) – Heard in the forests on Shikoku but never gave a good view. [*]

WHISTLING GREEN-PIGEON (RYUKYU) (*Treron formosae permagnus*) – Seen very well on Amami and heard calling beautifully; it really does sound like a Japanese flute, cut posted on IBC and xenocanto. On Okinawa we saw two roosting birds near Fungawa dam; see the video on Smugmug. Quite a scarce species overall, and will likely be split from the Taiwan birds to become Ryukyu Green Pigeon.

Cuculidae (Cuckoos)

LESSER CUCKOO (*Cuculus poliocephalus*) – Vocal at Miyake Nature Centre, but hard to see and we only got brief flight views.

COMMON CUCKOO (*Cuculus canorus*) – Calling nicely on Mt Fuji late afternoon, but stayed out of sight. A cuckoo found by Bernie on Okinawa was either this or Oriental Cuckoo, but we never heard it call, the only sure way to identify them. Maybe half a tick for each if it's new for you? Happily we later saw them well on Hokkaido!

ORIENTAL CUCKOO (*Cuculus optatus*) – Heard at Kushiro Forest Park and Shiretoko Pass. [*]

Caprimulgidae (Nightjars and Allies)

GRAY NIGHTJAR (*Caprimulgus jotaka*) – Calling well on Mt Fuji at dusk and most folks saw them. My recording is on the IBC site and XC.

Apodidae (Swifts)

WHITE-THROATED NEEDLETAIL (*Hirundapus caudacutus*) – 4 at Kushiro Forest Park were a nice find and gave good views.

PACIFIC SWIFT (*Apus pacificus*) – The group saw this on Miyake when Jun and I were away getting the cars. Not sure how regular it is here on the Izu Islands, I suspect quite rare. It was seen a few times on Hokkaido too, with noisy flocks at Shiretoko Pass and some over the sea wall at Ochiishi and out by some of the rocky islands offshore.

Rallidae (Rails, Gallinules, and Coots)

OKINAWA RAIL (*Gallirallus okinawae*) – Amazing views in the road at 0530, seen several times and at least 15 birds recorded. When I first came in 2001 this was extremely hard to see, but the mongoose busters program has reaped dividends. One of the birds of the trip, an outstanding experience of this rare flightless endemic.

EURASIAN MOORHEN (*Gallinula chloropus*) – Seen twice near Okuma on Okinawa, one bird with a juvenile.

WHITE-BREASTED WATERHEN (*Amaurornis phoenicurus leucomelana*) – Heard at Fungawa Dam when spotlighting there. [*]

RUDDY-BREASTED CRAKE (*Zapornia fusca*) – Seen briefly in the tatami rush fields at Okuma.

Gruidae (Cranes)

RED-CROWNED CRANE (*Grus japonensis*) – Lovely to see this against a verdant green background and not in deep snow. We saw them at Notsuke, near Teshikaga and near Furen, with a pair with a juvenile at the latter site. A great bird and still a rare species overall.

Scolopacidae (Sandpipers and Allies)

AMAMI WOODCOCK (*Scolopax mira*) – Another outstanding bird; we had amazing views of a family group of 3 birds in the road at Mt Yuwan, and saw 2 more later at point blank range- see my videos on the IBC site and at Smugmug. The mongoose control program here is working really well.

[E]

LATHAM'S SNIBE (*Gallinago hardwickii*) – Great to see them perched atop power poles on Hokkaido, and heard in display- a strange squelchy noise- at Nemuro Meiji Park too, whilst some folks saw one at Notsuke.

COMMON SANDPIPER (*Actitis hypoleucos*) – Just one at Teshikaga, very late to be here.

Glareolidae (Pratincoles and Coursers)

ORIENTAL PRATINCOLE (*Glareola maldivarum*) – Two seen from Amami airport, hawking over the ridges behind the Toyota Car Hire place, a good pick-up.

Alcidae (Auks, Murres, and Puffins)

SPECTACLED GUILLEMOT (*Cepphus carbo*) – Great views of summer plumage birds from the Ochiishi boat trip, the red legs and feet really stand out.

ANCIENT MURRELET (*Synthliboramphus antiquus*) – Great views of a few summer plumage birds from the Ochiishi boat trip.

RHINOCEROS AUKLET (*Cerorhinca monocerata*) – One off Notsuke was Phil's lifer, though he suspected one flying off Rausu earlier that day. Then some great views on the Ochiishi boat trip. Very hard to photograph though.

Laridae (Gulls, Terns, and Skimmers)

BLACK-TAILED GULL (*Larus crassirostris*) – Nice views of 2 or 3 from Miyakejima, and 3 around Ochiishi on Hokkaido.

HERRING GULL (VEGA) (*Larus argentatus vegae*) – A few of this pale-mantled Herring gull type at Ochiishi, split by most as Vega Gull.

SLATY-BACKED GULL (*Larus schistisagus*) – Very common and vocal on Hokkaido. One was mobbing a White-tailed Eagle sat on a sea wall at Kiritappu.

GLAUCOUS GULL (*Larus hyperboreus*) – A large, pale biscuit-colored gull flying in the distance off Notsuke looked like this species, but we later noticed that Slaty-backed in second year plumage can appear very bleached out at this time of the year, so best left uncertain.

BLACK-NAPED TERN (*Sterna sumatrana*) – Only seen on Okinawa, with a couple off Okuma Beach, 2 north of there and one as we came up from Naha.

Procellariidae (Shearwaters and Petrels)

STREAKED SHEARWATER (*Calonectris leucomelas*) – Good numbers on the sea crossing back from Miyakejima and off Cape Izu, but disappointingly little else.

SHORT-TAILED SHEARWATER (*Ardenna tenuirostris*) – Just 2 or 3 birds on the sea crossing back from Miyakejima.

Phalacrocoracidae (Cormorants and Shags)

RED-FACED CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax urile*) – The local guide knew where 4 birds were hanging out on small rocky islands off Ochiishi, and I could make out one crested cormorant type on a nest there. I took a series of photos hoping to get better looks, and when I uploaded them there were 4 birds with bright red facial skin against the black rocks! Very rare in Japan and at the extreme south of its range.

PELAGIC CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax pelagicus*) – Small numbers from the boat off Ochiishi.

GREAT CORMORANT (EURASIAN) (*Phalacrocorax carbo hanedae*) – A few seen flying on Shikoku and around Lake Yamanaka.

JAPANESE CORMORANT (*Phalacrocorax capillatus*) – Nice looks off Ochiishi, where they were nesting on the rocks, very much a bird of wild rocky coasts. [E]

Ardeidae (Herons, Egrets, and Bitterns)

GRAY HERON (*Ardea cinerea*) – A couple on Amami and Okinawa. Quite a few around Notsuke too, with 40 in one day, and looking very white-necked and pale grey above.

GREAT EGRET (EURASIAN) (*Ardea alba alba*) – Just one on Shikoku this trip, curiously scarce.

INTERMEDIATE EGRET (INTERMEDIATE) (*Ardea intermedia intermedia*) – A couple of singles from Okinawa.

PACIFIC REEF-HERON (*Egretta sacra sacra*) – A single dark phase bird was on the reef rocks north of Okuma on Okinawa.

CATTLE EGRET (EASTERN) (*Bubulcus ibis coromandus*) – Half a dozen seen on Okinawa; this is the eastern taxon which is split by both IOC and BirdLife, it has a distinctive orangey-headed breeding dress.

Pandionidae (Osprey).

OSPREY (HALIAETUS) (*Pandion haliaetus haliaetus*) – One over the dam at Shimanto on Shikoku.

Accipitridae (Hawks, Eagles, and Kites).

ORIENTAL HONEY-BUZZARD (*Pernis ptilorhynchus*) – A single at the Japanese Yellow Bunting site at Lake Yamanaka.

BLACK KITE (BLACK-EARED) (*Milvus migrans lineatus*) – Widespread in small numbers on Honshu and Shikoku, then a few on Hokkaido. A possible split, but the intergrade zone seems rather extensive.

WHITE-TAILED EAGLE (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) – We saw it nicely a few times, on Hokkaido only.

Strigidae (Owls).

JAPANESE SCOPS-OWL (*Otus semitorques*) – One was heard at dawn on Shikoku, but we were too busy with trying for the Fairy Pitta to do anything much with it. A split from what was Collared Scops Owl. [*]

RYUKYU SCOPS-OWL (*Otus elegans elegans*) – Great views on Amami after a bit of a chase, it was perched across a trunk and not very conspicuous. The yellow eyes showed well, and we heard several others here.

BLAKISTON'S FISH-OWL (*Ketupa blakistoni*) – Just wonderful, a huge female came in at 8.20 pm to the little pond at Washi no Yado, and stayed hunting and eating fish for some 20 minutes. The mate was calling a double deep hoot, and she would reply a single deep hoot if she didn't have a mouth full of fish! I got a nice recording of the pair duetting behind the lodge later. The recording is on the IBC website. Third time lucky for Joyce with this great species, a tremendous huge owl and very rare indeed with >200 on Hokkaido.

NORTHERN BOOBOOK (*Ninox japonica japonica*) – A fine effort on Amami brought one bird in for nice views as it perched up high in tree, calling too. Jun saw 3 at the Okuma Hotel after spotlighting too, but there were none the next night.

Alcedinidae (Kingfishers).

COMMON KINGFISHER (*Alcedo atthis*) – Nice views of a couple on Amami.

RUDDY KINGFISHER (*Halcyon coromanda*) – Vocal on Amami but really hard to see well. We only got flight views, though some folks got one on Okinawa where they were calling far away.

CRESTED KINGFISHER (*Megaceryle lugubris*) – Bernie and Chris saw one at Shimanto lake when we were in quest of the pitta.

Coraciidae (Rollers).

DOLLARBIRD (*Eurystomus orientalis*) – Great views and lovely colours of 3 birds at Shimanto on Shikoku, where a pair were nesting in a nest box.

Picidae (Woodpeckers).

PYGMY WOODPECKER (*Yungipicus kizuki*) – This diminutive near-endemic was seen at various woodland sites, and I got a fine video at the Okuma Hotel- see the IBC and Smugmug sites.

OKINAWA WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos noguchii*) – We got lucky with this one, initially having 2 fly over the car as we came back from seeing the Okinawa Rails, then great views of a pair up at Benoki Dam, where the male was drumming well- see the cut on Smugmug and the IBC. It is one of the rarest of all woodpeckers, with the population no more than 380 birds on current estimates, and maybe somewhat less. [E]

WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKER (*Dendrocopos leucotos*) – This was heard in Shikoku but stayed unseen unfortunately. [*]

WHITE-BACKED WOODPECKER (AMAMI) (*Dendrocopos leucotos owstoni*) – This highly distinctive taxon is only on Amami, and is split as Owston's Woodpecker by BirdLife. We had good views of one late afternoon at the Amami Nature Forest, and heard it drumming loudly. Another was seen briefly next day. [E]

GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER (GREAT SPOTTED) (*Dendrocopos major japonicus*) – Only seen twice, both times female birds, at Kushiro Nature Forest and then at Furen Center.

LESSER SPOTTED WOODPECKER (*Dryobates minor amurensis*) – A great find at Teshikaga lake, with a fine female showing well for all after initially disappearing with only Bernie and I having seen it! A second bird was briefly with it too, and this was Phil's first from Japan. This race has a large white back, quite unlike the dark-backed European birds.

JAPANESE WOODPECKER (*Picus awokera*) – Seen briefly at Shimanto forest on Shikoku. [E]

Falconidae (Falcons and Caracaras).

PEREGRINE FALCON (EURASIAN) (*Falco peregrinus japonensis*) – One bird flying at Notsuke, probably an immature. Bernie saw it or another later here.

Pittidae (Pittas).

FAIRY PITTA (*Pitta nympha*) – Very frustrating, as we only heard it on one morning in Shikoku, calling across a river and not coming to recordings. A rare bird in Japan and hard to get, worth a try but no cigar; a pity as Jun saw it the previous year. [*]

Campephagidae (Cuckooshrikes).

RYUKYU MINIVET (*Pericrocotus tegimae*) – Good views of this on Amami and Okinawa, but only single birds, though it was heard more than seen. [E]

ASHY MINIVET (*Pericrocotus divaricatus*) – Seen well near the hotel on Shikoku, a summer migrant here.

Monarchidae (Monarch Flycatchers).

JAPANESE PARADISE-FLYCATCHER (*Terpsiphone atrocaudata atrocaudata*) – Heard near the hotel on Shikoku, but promptly vanished. [*]

JAPANESE PARADISE-FLYCATCHER (*Terpsiphone atrocaudata illex*) – Wow, these were HARD- we had brief looks at a pair on Amami, and the same on Okinawa, they are very active but hard to find, and they just don't sit for long.

Corvidae (Crows, Jays, and Magpies).

EURASIAN JAY (BRANDT'S) (*Garrulus glandarius brandtii*) – One at Kushiro Nature Forest, a dark-headed dark-eyed bird that is long overdue to be split.

EURASIAN JAY (JAPANESE) (*Garrulus glandarius japonicus*) – This pale-eyed taxon was seen in Shikoku, and will no doubt be a split in due course.

LIDTH'S JAY (*Garrulus lidthi*) – Great views on Amami of this gorgeous pink and blue creature, and quite noisy too. Endemic to Amami too, a very special bird. I have posted recordings on the IBC and XC sites. [E]

AZURE-WINGED MAGPIE (JAPANESE) (*Cyanopica cyanus japonica*) – A lucky find at a red light in Fujionoya, we had good looks at 5 birds in someone's backyard basically. Long since split by IOC and BirdLife from the highly disjunct Iberian birds.

EURASIAN NUTCRACKER (NORTHERN) (*Nucifraga caryocatactes japonica*) – Seen a couple of times on Mt Fuji, a high altitude species in Japan.

CARRION CROW (*Corvus corone orientalis*) – Quite common Honshu and round Tokyo, with a few on Hokkaido.

LARGE-BILLED CROW (LARGE-BILLED) (*Corvus macrorhynchos japonensis*) – The common mainland crow, the large bill and high domed forehead are distinctive, as are the calls.

LARGE-BILLED CROW (LARGE-BILLED) (*Corvus macrorhynchos connectens*) – I was surprised at how distinctive these Ryukyu birds are from the mainland ones- smaller, shorter winged, longer tailed, smaller bill, much less domed forehead and quite different calls. It seems obvious this is another species, if the 5 Australian lookalike corvids are split then this one is equally as distinct as any of them. The whole complex really needs to be properly evaluated with up to date methods.

Alaudidae (Larks)

EURASIAN SKYLARK (ASIAN) (*Alauda arvensis japonica*) – Small numbers from Hokkaido, where it was in display at Notsuke.

Hirundinidae (Swallows)

BARN SWALLOW (*Hirundo rustica*) – Small numbers from Shikoku and Honshu. This form has quite white underparts. One bird from the boat off Ochiishi too, the only one we saw on Hokkaido!

PACIFIC SWALLOW (*Hirundo tahitica namiyei*) – Small numbers on the Ryukyus, a small swallow with dingy underparts.

RED-RUMPED SWALLOW (RED-RUMPED) (*Cecropis daurica japonica*) – About 5 birds on Shikoku were the only ones we encountered.

ASIAN HOUSE-MARTIN (*Delichon dasypus*) – A nice colony on a roadside structure on Shikoku, with mud pellet nests. The dark underwing coverts were very obvious.

Paridae (Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice)

COAL TIT (CONTINENTAL) (*Periparus ater insularis*) – A few from Mt Fuji, mostly in conifers, then nice looks on Hokkaido.

VARIED TIT (*Sittiparus varius varius*) – Good views from Shimanto Forest on Shikoku.

VARIED TIT (*Sittiparus varius amamii*) – We saw a couple on Amami, much paler than mainland birds and with a pale breast gorget.

OWSTON'S TIT (*Sittiparus owstoni*) – I was getting anxious about this recently split species on Miyakejima, but happily we finally got good views of one by the Nature Centre. It looks larger, heavier billed and much darker below than the mainland and Ryukyu Varied Tits from which it is split. Clearly uncommon, I missed it twice on Hachijojima in winter so this was a good catch up. [E]

MARSH TIT (*Poecile palustris hensoni*) – Seen a couple of times on Hokkaido, best views at Kushiro Forest Park.

WILLOW TIT (WILLOW) (*Poecile montanus restrictus*) – Seen briefly at Shimanto Forest.

JAPANESE TIT (*Parus minor*) – Fairly common on Honshu and Hokkaido, and a few on Shikoku.

Aegithalidae (Long-tailed Tits)

LONG-TAILED TIT (CAUDATUS) (*Aegithalos caudatus caudatus*) – Two nice white-headed birds at Teshikaga lake.

LONG-TAILED TIT (EUROPAEUS GROUP) (*Aegithalos caudatus trivirgatus*) – Just two on Shikoku, this race has a dark eyeline.

Sittidae (Nuthatches)

EURASIAN NUTHATCH (WHITE-BELLIED) (*Sitta europaea asiatica*) – Only seen on Hokkaido this trip, where it was calling well and showed nicely at Kushiro Forest Park.

Certhiidae (Trecreepers)

EURASIAN TREECREEPER (*Certhia familiaris*) – One from Kushiro Forest Park, but hard to see well as it kept high up.

Troglodytidae (Wrens)

EURASIAN WREN (EURASIAN) (*Troglodytes troglodytes fumigatus*) – Great views from the forest walk on Mt Fuji where it was singing well and showed nicely; much darker than Eurasian birds and a split in waiting. Also seen at Kushiro Forest Park and heard at Furen.

Cinclidae (Dippers)

BROWN DIPPER (*Cinclus pallasii*) – Seen nicely on the stream by Washi no Yado, where a pair were nesting nearby.

Pycnonotidae (Bulbuls)

LIGHT-VENTED BULBUL (*Pycnonotus sinensis*) – A few around Okuma on Okinawa, it is now thought that it may be a native species and not introduced as was once thought.

BROWN-EARED BULBUL (*Hypsipetes amaurotis amaurotis*) – Very common and noisy throughout the mainland except on Hokkaido, where we saw none this trip.

BROWN-EARED BULBUL (*Hypsipetes amaurotis pryeri*) – Common and noisy on Okinawa, this race has a distinctive reddish chest and a slightly less shrill voice than the mainland birds.

Regulidae (Kinglets)

GOLDCREST (ASIAN) (*Regulus regulus japonensis*) – Good views of a couple from the track to the birdbath at Okinuwa on Mt Fuji.

Scotocercidae (Bush Warblers and Allies)

JAPANESE BUSH WARBLER (*Horornis diphone cantans*) – Heard on all the islands except Amami, and eventually one seen nicely at Meiji Park in Nemuro where it was calling well- see my cut on the IBC and XC sites.

Phylloscopidae (Leaf Warblers)

EASTERN CROWNED WARBLER (*Phylloscopus coronatus*) – One singing and seen quite well at the Lava tree park on Mt Fuji. Then nice views of a vocal bird at Meiji Park in Nemuro, and heard at Furen.

IJIMA'S LEAF WARBLER (*Phylloscopus ijimae*) – Great views and calling well at Miyake Nature Centre, my photo is on the Smugmug page. An Izu Islands endemic, and a summer visitor here. The pale orange lower mandible was quite striking. [E]

SAKHALIN LEAF WARBLER (*Phylloscopus borealoides*) – Singing well, but the very devil to see at Kushiro Forest Park, though persistence paid off and we eventually got it to show well. Another was heard here, and later we heard two at Furen.

JAPANESE LEAF WARBLER (*Phylloscopus xanthodryas*) – Seen nicely and calling well on Mt Fuji.

Acrocephalidae (Reed Warblers and Allies)

BLACK-BROWED REED WARBLER (*Acrocephalus bistrigiceps*) – One singing bird at the lake at Teshikaga was a nice trip addition from what was a very productive stop here.

ORIENTAL REED WARBLER (*Acrocephalus orientalis*) – This was heard distantly out in the ricefields near Okuma. [*]

Locustellidae (Grassbirds and Allies)

SAKHALIN GRASSHOPPER-WARBLER (*Locustella amnicola*) – This is a late arriving migrant so we were not sure they were in yet, but happily a bird started calling as we were about to leave Meiji Forest Park at Nemuro, and we had several flight views, though it was adept at hiding and no-one saw it well perched. We heard it again early next day, but again with only a glimpse. Jun says this is typical behavior and he has not yet managed to photograph it. A split from what was Gray's Grasshopper Warbler.

MIDDENDORFF'S GRASSHOPPER-WARBLER (*Locustella ochotensis*) – A great find on Notsuke, initially very hard to see but came good and was seen next day too. My video is on the IBC site and the recordings there and on the XC site.

PLESKE'S GRASSHOPPER-WARBLER (*Locustella pleskei*) – This was great on Miyakejima, where despite very strong winds one was singing atop a small bush as we got out of the van, and stayed for scope views. Two others were calling nearby. It is an obscure and little known bird that only nests on small offshore Japanese islands where it is a summer visitor. One of my birds of the trip.

LANCEOLATED WARBLER (*Locustella lanceolata*) – Our trip to the wet meadow near Kiritappu paid off well with very close views of this skulking species.

Cisticolidae (Cisticolas and Allies)

ZITTING CISTICOLA (ZITTING) (*Cisticola juncidis brunneiceps*) – Nice views by Amami Airport, and again at Okuma on Okinawa. This taxon has double zitting notes and some single musical notes preceding. The whole complex is long overdue for splitting as several taxa are quite distinct.

Zosteropidae (White-eyes, Yuhinas, and Allies)

JAPANESE WHITE-EYE (*Zosterops japonicus*) – Common and widespread, but now no longer exists as the group has been split 4 ways and this becomes Warbling White-eye. I imagine Clements will eventually catch-up. Identifying what is where is now very hard as they all look alike.....

Leiothrichidae (Laughingthrushes and Allies)

CHINESE HWAMEI (*Garrulax canorus*) – Singing loudly at the Nature Park at Otainai-Seiko, but none of the group saw them. This is an introduced species that seems to be establishing quickly and spreading. [I]

Muscicapidae (Old World Flycatchers)

BLUE-AND-WHITE FLYCATCHER (*Cyanoptila cyanomelana intermedia*) – Heard on Shikoku only; I had thought it would be more widespread. [*]

JAPANESE ROBIN (*Larvivora akahige*) – A fantastic singing male at Kushiro Forest Park, perched up on a dead branch and singing well, but my recording was drowned by deafening cicada noise and my video not focussed on the bird! Shame.

JAPANESE ROBIN (IZU) (*Larvivora akahige tanensis*) – Calling well and seen very nicely at Miyake Nature Centre; a most distinctive taxon that Mark Brazil splits in his new Field Guide, as do BirdLife, and I think they are right. A lifer for Phil.

RYUKYU ROBIN (RYUKYU) (*Larvivora komadori komadori*) – Great views on Amami, this one has white flanks and behaves rather differently to the far more confiding Okinawa birds. BirdLife and Mark Brazil split this as Amami Robin, and again I think correctly.

RYUKYU ROBIN (OKINAWA) (*Larvivora komadori namiyei*) – Seen nicely as we were looking for the Okinawa Rail, with good views of a fine black throated male with extensive black flanks, as well as a showy rusty backed female and an immature. Split by BirdLife and Mark Brazil as Okinawa Robin, I think correctly.

SIBERIAN BLUE ROBIN (*Larvivora cyane*) – A vocal bird at the Lava tree Nature Park on Mt Fuji responded well to the song of Japanese Robin, but when it eventually showed it proved to be this species, which was also heard at high altitude on Mt Fuji.

SIBERIAN RUBYTHROAT (*Calliope calliope*) – A fabulous male at Notsuke, well picked Melissa, and it came right in to the recording, see the video on Smugmug. Another was seen later further down the road here. One of the birds of the trip for many.

RED-FLANKED BLUETAIL (*Tarsiger cyanurus*) – Nice looks at singing birds on Mt Fuji on the birdbath trail.

NARCISSUS FLYCATCHER (NARCISSUS) (*Ficedula narcissina narcissina*) – Seen nicely at Yamanaka on two days, a showy bird, then again at Kushiro Forest.

NARCISSUS FLYCATCHER (GREEN-CROWNED) (*Ficedula narcissina owstoni*) – A lovely male on Amami, my photo even shows the dark olive-green crown, well spotted by Melissa. Another BirdLife split too and quite a tricky species to locate.

BLUE ROCK-THRUSH (PHILIPPENSIS) (*Monticola solitarius philippensis*) – Very common on the Ryukyus, where they are a suburban bird. Another BirdLife split, as Eastern Blue Rock Thrush, you know it makes sense!

SIBERIAN STONECHAT (STEJNEGER'S) (*Saxicola maurus stejnegeri*) – Some nice views from Notsuke and near Kiritappu, this taxon is split by the IOC as Stejneger's Stonechat. The whole Stonechat complex still needs sorting out as several African taxa are amazingly distinct.

Turdidae (Thrushes and Allies)

SCALY THRUSH (AMAMI) (*Zoothera dauma major*) – Our morning with the guide to a site with 3 pairs of this rare bird proved unsuccessful, but next day we heard two singing very close by and got brief looks at one of them. This is split by both BirdLife and the IOC; it is a large long-billed species with a distinct song, endemic to Amami.

JAPANESE THRUSH (*Turdus cardis*) – Good views late in the afternoon on Mt Fuji, where it was singing well.

BROWN-HEADED THRUSH (*Turdus chrysolaus*) – Singing well late afternoon high on Mt Fuji, and seen nicely in the scope both days.

IZU THRUSH (*Turdus celaenops*) – Shy and elusive, but we got fine views at Miyake Nature Centre of this Izu Islands endemic thrush. The Nature Centre is named Akakakoko, the local name for this species. [E]

Sturnidae (Starlings)

CHESTNUT-CHEEKED STARLING (*Agropsar philippensis*) – Two at Yamanaka on power lines there, the male with chestnut cheeks and throat, a distinctive bird. Then one at Teshikaga, a few more from Notsuke and the best a female at Furen - see my shot on the Smugmug site.

WHITE-CHEEKED STARLING (*Spodiopsar cineraceus*) – Small numbers on Honshu.

Motacillidae (Wagtails and Pipits)

GRAY WAGTAIL (*Motacilla cinerea*) – Seen on Shikoku and nesting near Kushiro.

JAPANESE WAGTAIL (*Motacilla grandis*) – A pair were feeding two youngsters at the creek at Narita when we did a foray here pre-trip. This is very nearly a Japanese endemic species, there are just a few in Korea as well.

WHITE WAGTAIL (BLACK-BACKED) (*Motacilla alba lugens*) – Seen at Narita Creek and odd birds on Shikoku Honshu and Hokkaido; the wings are amazingly white in flight. Formerly split as Black-backed Wagtail, the Dutch guys now split all the very distinctive taxa.

OLIVE-BACKED PIPIT (*Anthus hodgsoni*) – Seen several times on Mt Fuji where they must be nesting.

Fringillidae (Finches, Euphonias, and Allies)

JAPANESE GROSBEAK (*Eophona personata*) – A small group high in the trees at the Nature Park at Otainai-rinko, a striking bird with a huge yellow beak.

LONG-TAILED ROSEFINCH (*Carpodacus sibiricus*) – Lovely views at Meiji Park in Nemuro with 2 males one day and a pair the next morning. A male was also seen more distantly at Notsuke. Photo on Smugmug.

PINE GROSBEAK (EURASIAN) (*Pinicola enucleator sakhalinensis*) – Yay! Some photographers had been at Shiretoko Pass since 0400 without any sighting, and the fog then came in so I thought we had no chance. Suddenly a male appeared on a pine top close to the car park and we got reasonable views in the conditions, see the atmospheric video on Smugmug. Another flew over calling later, probably a female on the brief look. A long overdue lifer for Phil who'd missed it in Scandinavia and Colorado.

EURASIAN BULLFINCH (BAIKAL) (*Pyrrhula pyrrhula griseiventris*) – Close looks at a grey-bellied male at the birdbath on Mt Fuji, and a pair at Shiretoko Pass. This is another BirdLife split too.

ORIENTAL GREENFINCH (*Chloris sinica*) – Small numbers from Shikoku and the Mt Fuji lowlands, also a few on Hokkaido.

Emberizidae (Old World Buntings)

MEADOW BUNTING (*Emberiza cioides*) – Nice looks on Shikoku.

REED BUNTING (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) – A male at Notsuke.

YELLOW BUNTING (*Emberiza sulphurata*) – Hmm, we made 3 visits to Jun's site at Yamanaka and heard it every time, but the bird promptly vanished. A few of us got onto it on the last visit where it naturally flew just as I got the scope on it.

BLACK-FACED BUNTING (PERSONATA) (*Emberiza spodocephala personata*) – Seen a few times, the best on Hokkaido. This taxon is very distinct and split as Masked Bunting by BirdLife and in Mark Brazil's Japan Field Guide.

Passeridae (Old World Sparrows)

EURASIAN TREE SPARROW (*Passer montanus*) – Small numbers were widespread in the lowlands throughout.

MAMMALS

RYUKYU RABBIT (*Pentalagus furnessi*) – Fantastic views of the fat black bunny with the small ears and pale skin around the eye on Amami when we were spotlighting. It is rare mammal and gravely threatened by cats and mongoose, but happily feral pest control really seems to be working here on Amami.

RED FOX (*Vulpes vulpes*) – Nice looks at several on Hokkaido, the Notsuke animal was very pale orangey in colour and looked like it was molting.

SEA OTTER (*Enhydra lutris*) – Good views of 2 at sea off Ochiishi, one looked huge, like a seal, and had quite a pale head. Apparently there were 3 on the rocks as well but we did not see them.

WILD BOAR (*Sus scrofa riukiuanus*) – The Ryukyu taxon is very small form- we saw a couple one night on Amami, one briefly next day, then a couple of sightings from Okinawa at night. The best was the small piglet with the faded stripes foraging in the rain near Benoki.

SIKA DEER (*Cervus nippon*) – A couple seen on Mt Fuji and some incredible loud vocals that I really regret being unable to record. Then a few on Hokkaido but nothing like as obvious as in winter.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Favorite bird sightings were much as expected- Blakiston's Fish Owl of course, Siberian Rubythroat, Amami Woodcock, Okinawa Rail and Izu Thrush, whilst Red-necked Grebe was one surprising choice. Rhinoceros Auklet also figured. Pleske's Grasshopper Warbler was Phil's choice, along with Pine Grosbeak, whilst Jun picked Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler, these *Locustella* are clearly a guide-thing.

OTHER WILDLIFE AND FLORA: A couple of very nice snakes seen in the road on a night foray - including the dreaded Habu or hundred pace snake (*Protobothrops flavoviridis*), which seems to terrify the locals (and some of our group). This was by the road near Fungawa Dam on our first night spotlighting on Okinawa, but did not linger, it was quite a good size one at over 3 ft long. These snakes are also known as tree vipers or pit vipers. There are three species of Habus found on Okinawa, 2 being introduced and one native to the island. They are all venomous snakes that feed mainly on rodents and other small mammals. It is the custom in Okinawa to catch these snakes and use their bodies pickled in a potent drink known as Habu sake, purported to have great medicinal properties! Yuk.

Akamata Dinodon semicarinatum was the non-poisonous snake we found dead on Amami.

The small snake with the dark vertical bands on Okinawa on the wet night was perhaps the himei habu *Trimeresurus okinavensis* the smaller of the highly venomous species of habu on the island (these are the ones they introduced the mongoose to kill----doh!).

Amphibians

Holst's frog (*Rana holstii*) was the large spotted frog we saw on the road to Benoki on that wet night.

The small frogs that were all over the road in one area the same night, with the snake nearby, were *Buergersia buergersii*

A red-bellied black newt called the sword-tailed newt (*Cynops ensicauda*) was seen in ponds on Amami at the Nature Forest, where it is an Endangered endemic. The sword-tailed newt has no predators, so deforestation, introduced fish predators and land development are the main reasons for their being threatened.

Butterflies & moths

A lovely greenish-yellow lunar moth (*Actias artemis*) at Fujiomora as we came out of Coco's Restaurant. Photo on the Smugmug site.

The warmer climates of the Ryukyus had a good variety of butterflies. I have erred on the side of caution and mainly identified from photographs where feasible, though it was hard with the swallowtails which never seem to alight. These are some firm identifications:

Atrophaneura alcinous chinese windmill- the long-tailed large red-bodied black with yellow sub-apical dots swallowtail of Okinawa.

Parantica sita chestnut tiger- the large black, orange and white checkered species from Amami

Papilio helenus red Helen- Common on Okinawa, another widespread species

Graphium sarpedon blue triangle- common on Honshu, Shikoku and the Ryukyus, a very widespread species

Colias erate Eastern pale clouded yellow- the yellow from Okuma

Neptis hylas common sailer - the black and white butterfly at Benoki Dam

Vanessa cardui the painted lady at Kushiro Forest.

Argyreus hyperbius Indian fritillary - the striking orange, black and white butterfly at Benoki was a female of this widespread species

Hebomoia glaucippe great orange-tip -the large orange-tip on Amami

Chilades pandava plains cupid or cycad blue- the pale blue from Cape Hedo

Chaospes benjamini common awlwing- the distinctive greenish skipper with the orange wing dot from Amami

Plants

The endemic cycad that was common on N. Okinawa is *Cycas revoluta*, and the common yellowy flowered camellia in the forest there is *Camellia sinensis*.

Thanks to John Keith for help with the botanical side of things, it was fun trying to assign things to family or genus and lots of link with E North America were evident.

VEGETATION OF JAPAN--A BRIEF SUMMARY:

Although Japan is a small country, it has an exceptional variety of plants because of its large range of latitude, altitude, and diversity of environments. Because we visited many types of habitats on our trip, we saw a great deal of that variety. Japan is densely populated, with 127 million people in an area the size of California, and the landscape has been drastically altered over thousands of years. However, there are still large preserves of native forests and other habitats where one can see some of what the original vegetation was like. Many of the plants of Japan are analogs of those found in eastern North America, so in central Japan we saw trees such as oaks, willows, maples, mulberries, elms, and others were familiar to us. In Honshu and Shikoku, most wildflowers had already bloomed. However, in Shikoku, there were large Jack-in-the-pulpits, *Arisema* spp., still in bloom. On Mt. Fuji, the high altitude forest was composed primarily of larches, *Larix kaempferi*, and Veitch's Fir, *Abies veitchii*. Understory plants included *Rhododendron brachycarpum*; birch, *Betula ermanii*; and Lingonberry, *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*. There were large stands of Sugi, or Japanese Cedar, *Cryptomeria japonica*, on lower slopes; these tall, straight trees are the source of the massive beams in temples and other traditional wooden structures. The lower forests also had in the understory extensive stands of the poisonous False Hellebore, *Veratrum album*. In the southern islands, we encountered subtropical forests that had a large variety of evergreen, deciduous trees and shrubs. These included hollies; laurels, such as *Aucuba* spp. and Camphor Laurel, *Cinnamomum camphora*; Stone Oaks, *Lithocarpus* spp.; magnolias; several species of bamboo; native genera of palms; and interesting shrubs, such as *Melostoma malabathricum*. There were also several genera of ferns, including spectacular Tree Ferns, *Alsophila* spp. On Okinawa, the southern two-thirds of the island is more or less cleared of native vegetation, but the northern one-third retains much of its original forests.

Hokkaido, with its history of extensive Pleistocene glaciation and current cold, snowy winters was the only part of our trip that had numerous wildflowers still in bloom, plus a luxuriant understory of ferns in the moist valley forests. Flowers included fritillary, *Fritillaria japonica*; columbines; *Aquilegia* spp.; Golden Banner, *Thermopsis* spp.; primroses; irises; *Trillium* spp.; and a lot of Skunk Cabbage. The higher parts of the Shiretoko Peninsula were especially interesting botanically, as the high altitude vegetation is a pygmy forest of Dwarf Siberian Pine, *Pinus pumila*, spruce, Dwarf Bamboo, and birch. These trees and other plants have been highly distorted or compressed by very deep winter snow cover and extreme winds. We did not have an opportunity to explore alpine meadows there, but the ones we could see at a distance appeared to have extensive wildflower blooms.

John Keith

Totals for the tour: 152 bird taxa and 5 mammal taxa