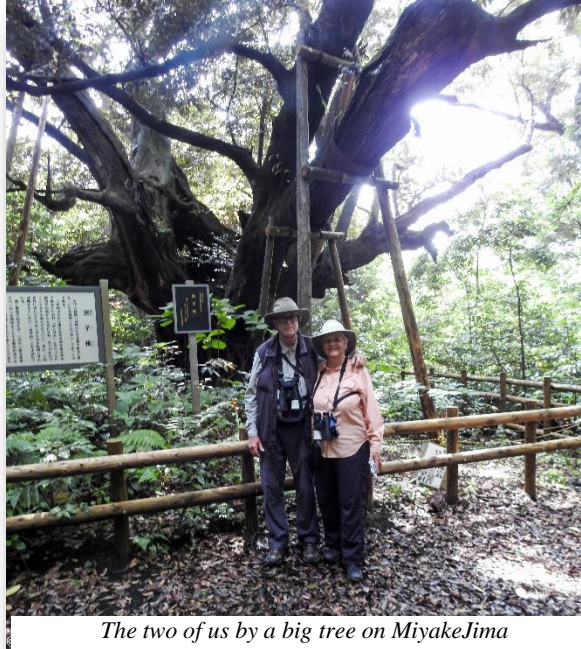


2016 Japan Trip

May 27-June 20, 2016

About the Photos:

Most of these photos have been uploaded to Google Photos, where you can see them at full scale, download them, comment, etc. Use this link: <https://goo.gl/photos/EyhEvUGDRXzuZrf57>.



The two of us by a big tree on MiyakeJima

First, as usual, a taste of what is to come, our signature Big Tree photo:

May 27 -28 Traveling

After our marathon journey thru the Caribbean, we opted for what we thought would be an easier way to reach my self-imposed target of 5000 species seen in 45 years of birding. With our treasured traveling companions, Jenny and Terry Cloudman, we did a tour of Japan guided by Mark Brazil, who wrote the field guide we planned to use. Mark is English by birth, a PhD ornithologist, who has lived in Japan for about 20 years and married to Mayumi, a lovely Japanese woman who arranged our lodging and meals. Mark speaks Japanese well, and Mayumi can even read it, which is quite a trick. (More about that later.)

We set off at 1:40 am from San Francisco on the first leg of our voyage, a China Air flight to

Taiwan with a connection to Okinawa. Recalling an earlier incident on a very similar flight that wound up with an unplanned hospital stay for Linda, we ponied up for Business Class, which was surprisingly reasonable. Of course, this was a red eye flight.

After a short stop in Taiwan, we landed in Okinawa mid-morning, and checked into our hotel in time for an afternoon nap before meeting Mark and Mayumi for dinner. Jenny and Terry had arrived the night before.

May 29: Southern Okinawa, near Naha

We slept late. Met for breakfast at the leisurely hour of 7:00. Then we set off for some birding. We saw our first Japanese lifer right away: three [Black-faced Spoonbills](#) lingering in a small pond after all their companions had left for northern breeding grounds. As we should have expected for such



Three Black-faced Spoonbills

layabouts, they kept their heads tucked in most of the time. We were able to see the black faces once or twice, and had a comparison with the much larger

[Eurasian Spoonbill](#)

Thanks to Terry for the spoonbill photos.

In the same area, we saw several mud skippers at the top of funnel-shaped structure they built.



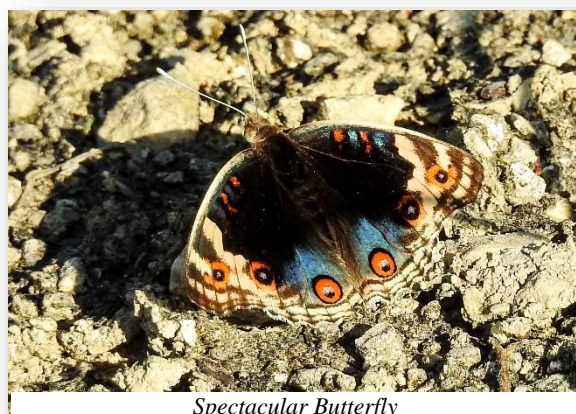
Eurasian Spoonbill



Mud Skipper

This spectacular butterfly was one of the loveliest of the entire trip. We haven't identified it yet.

We went to the shore to look for shorebirds, and found quite a few. We also found a true rarity, a Japanese birder. He recognized Mark, and after a round of



Spectacular Butterfly

pleasantries told us that he had found a nest of a [Japanese Paradise Flycatcher](#), one of the birds we hoped to see. We followed him to the spot and found the nest, which seemed to be abandoned. The Japanese birder bowed low, abashed at his failure to show us the flycatcher.

The area near the nest was not without some interesting aspects. This swallowtail butterfly was common. We even saw two of them mating. The area also turned up a strange caterpillar and a nice spider.

There was more to come. A very cooperative [Whistling Green-pigeon](#), usually a very shy species, sat in the open and let us take a photo. Note its purple eye. Mark told us we can't count it unless we see the eye.



Swallowtail Butterfly



Strange Caterpillar, about 1" (2.5cm)



Whistling Green-pigeon



Aranea sp(?)

The next day, we planned to drive to the north part of the island, but first we stopped off to repeat our search for the Japanese Paradise-flycatcher near the abandoned nest.

Success! The female seemed to be gathering material for a new nest. A male with the long tail flew past a couple of times. Terry managed to get a good photo of a female or maybe an immature male.



Japanese Paradise Flycatcher, Terry photo

[May 30-31: Yombura Area](#)

The Northern part of Okinawa, known as the Yombura area proved to be just as interesting as the southern part, near Naha.

For example, although we have seen [Blue Rock Thrushes](#) several times in the past, they can be truly beautiful in the right light. Here's one carrying food for nestlings.



Blue Rock Thrush with Food



Eastern Cattle Egrets, two in Breeding Plumage

[Cattle Egrets](#) are one of the most widely distributed species on the planet. Therefore, it was inevitable that the ornithological authorities would split them into two new species. The **Eastern Cattle Egret**, which is found in Japan, does look somewhat different from the **Western Cattle Egret** we have in the US, especially in breeding plumage. See for yourself.

Several nice dragonflies were hanging around the same rice paddies where we saw the Cattle Egrets. Linda managed to take a photo of a brilliant red one. I managed to take one of a Clubtail, which can be identified by the large swelling at the end of the abdomen.

The fields in the area provided the best view we have ever had of [Cinnamon Bitterns](#). Indeed, we saw a *siege* of Bitterns. Terry captured a good photo. I have several shots of the reeds in clear focus with the bird in the background.



Cinnamon Bittern, Terry C Photo



Jim's Clubtail



Linda's Red Dragonfly

Now, it was time for the start of a sleep deprivation experiment. Japan uses a strange time zone for its position on the planet. If you travel due north from Japan, you hit Russia, where it will be two hours later.

This means that it gets light very early. At the end of our trip, in Hokkaido, further north, dawn was about 3:30 am. Since the best time to see many birds is just after dawn, we started getting up early. Then, there were many birds and other animals that we could see only at night, we often stayed out late. In Yombura, we stayed out until almost midnight.

We did take a nap in the afternoon, when there was less to see. We saw some fantastic sights at night.

One of the most beautiful snakes I have ever seen is this striking [Okinawan or Ryukyu Green Snake](#), which we saw during the drive.



Okinawan Green Snake

This snake just wanted to escape the light. It slithered off into the woods. Another one that showed up later caused a minor kerfuffle when it disappeared into the wheel well of the vehicle. We devoted considerable time and effort to see if it was still there. We never did locate it again, but hope it got away.



Linda and local guide try to find the snake that crawled into the wheel well.



Ryukyu Kajika Frog, about 1" (2.5cm) in size

This tiny frog, [Ryukyu Kajika Frog](#), was surprisingly difficult to see, even when spotlighted on the pavement as in this photo. Linda finally saw the one I was shining my light on.



Akamata Snake

A common snake — we saw several — is this **Akamata Snake**. There is one venomous snake, [Habu](#), that lives on Okinawa. We were not allowed out of the vehicle when one of these was spotted, so we don't have any photos. The government offers a bounty for each one collected. We were followed by a truck full of snake bounty hunters that caught one of them. We were not impressed with their snake handling expertise. Apparently, the government is not familiar with the [Cobra Effect](#), when an attempted solution makes a problem worse. Wikipedia has an article on this.

Ryukyu, in case you're wondering, is the name of the island kingdom including Okinawa and several other islands. The name was changed when they were absorbed into the Japanese Empire.

One of the main night time attractions of Okinawa is the nocturnal [Okinawa Rail](#). They used to be very difficult to find, but the population has expanded in recent years as they have adapted to humans and gotten more protection. We saw several during our various night drives.



Okinawa Rail

We didn't spend *all* of our time on night drives. There were some interesting birds, lizards, and bugs we saw during the day.

Mark caught a [Swordtail Newt](#), which the locals called a "fire belly." The latter name is particularly apt. Here's a photo. Another interesting lizard was this [Kuroiwa's Ground Gecko](#).



Swordtail Newt, aka Fire Belly

This one was growing a new tail.



Kuroiwa's Ground Gecko



Vending Machine Moth

Early in the morning of our last day on Okinawa, we stopped at an overlook by a large dam. I noticed a leaf that had fallen into one of the ubiquitous vending machines that we frequented often, especially for hot lattes in the morning.

. How did that get there? I wondered. Turned out the answer was obvious. Of course, it was a moth, not a leaf, and it was on the outside, not the inside. My confusion was not without some justification, though.

Did you wonder if I saw any spiders? Here is a spectacular one. This resembles the *Gasteracantha* species we have in the USA. I suspect it is in the same genus, but I am not sure.



Okinawa Gasteracantha species (?)

Without many birds to observe, we focused instead on bugs. Linda found this tiny caterpillar on a leaf. That's her hand in the picture.



Peace Memorial



Tiny caterpillar on a leaf. Linda's hand included for scale.

We stopped by a memorial to peace, and the dead in World War II, when Okinawa was the only Japanese island (not counting atolls such as Iwo Jima) that we invaded. The carnage was dreadful. Indeed, the ferocity of the resistance was one argument for dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This monument included a lengthy text in what Mayumi called “poetic Japanese.” We asked for a translation. Turns out the text was not very complimentary regarding the USA. I commented that the shape of the memorial reminded me of a near-universal sign of disrespect.

The USA maintains some military bases on the island, which seem to be a source of continual controversy. The locals would like them gone, but also seem to like the dollars that flow into the island from the bases.

Mark told us a story about some soldiers that gave him a ride. They seemed to be completely ignorant of details of life on the islands, having spent most of their time on the base. For example, when they insisted on paying the road tolls in dollars, they were charged an exorbitant exchange rate. It's not difficult to get local currency anywhere in Japan from one of the ATMs scattered around.

Amami Oshima

The Amami islands are mostly small islands lying between Okinawa and the main Japanese islands. The *Shima* part of the name means *island*, while the *O* prefix means *big*. Thus *Amami Oshima* means *Big Amami Island*. It is, of course, the largest island in the group.

We drove to the airport in Naha and took a short flight to the island. We were accompanied on the flight by a sizable flock of school children returning from a trip to the big city. This resulted in a humorous incident during the standard safety talk. The talk in Japanese lasted for about 5 minutes, which, according to our translators, included a lot of discussion of the school trip. Finally, it was time for the English language announcement, which was, "Please watch the safety demo."

We stopped on the way to our hotel at the local harbor, where we finally spotted a bird that had eluded us many times, a *jinx bird*, [Roseate Tern](#).

Here is a photo showing three Roseate Terns with a [Black-naped Tern](#) in the foreground. The tern on the left shows a bit of the rose color on the breast, which is present only in breeding season.



Roseate Terns with Black-naped Tern in the Foreground

Nearby, we saw a very rare bird for the area, **Swinhoe's Egret**, now more properly known as [Chinese Egret](#). This one posed nicely on a floating platform, showing the diagnostic bill and leg color.

We continued our regimen of birding early morning and after dark with a break in the afternoon. Many of the creatures we hoped to see are nocturnal.



Amami Rabbit



Swinhoe's or Chinese Egret

Two mammals, the [Amami Rabbit](#) and the [Long-haired Rat](#) are endemic to the island. We saw several of both. Mark had never seen the rat before. Quite big for a rat, about the size of a small house cat, we found this

one on a telephone cable. Linda insisted that I show the long tail with the little kink in the end. He's kinda cute.



Long-haired Rat

Shortly after that sighting, we stopped along the road for a number of things, one of which was a hairy green caterpillar that many think is the best photo of the trip. Makes a good wallpaper picture. Notice that one of the neon blue dots



Hairy Green Caterpillar

seems to be missing on the second segment, nonetheless, it is a spectacular insect.

Several frogs help to expand the list of reptiles and amphibians seen on our nocturnal expeditions.

One of these, [Amami Ishikawa frog](#) excited Mark, not as much as the rat, but still... This small frog climbed onto our guide's pant leg, truly ironic, as Tsuneda doesn't like frogs. The top of his shoe gives you the scale. Notice the small golden dots at the center of the black spots on the back. This distinguishes this frog from the similar [Tip-nosed frog](#), which we saw nearby. Notice that the black spots lack the golden centers.



Amami Ishikawa Frog on Tsuneda's Pants Leg



Tip-nosed Frog (Green Morph)

We saw an interesting spider in a ditch by the side of the road, a type of fishing spider. This one doesn't descend underwater with a bubble of air as some fishing spiders. Instead, she dangles her white toes in the water to attract insects, which she grabs and eats. Notice that this one is munching on a small bug.



Fishing Spider chowing down on a bug she caught.

The most amazing bug we saw during our drives was the creature shown below. Our guide called it a *giant centipede*. My research suggests it is instead a [House Centipede](#), *Scutigera coleoptrata*, an insect native to the Mediterranean that has been introduced widely into other areas. Some people keep these as pets! We thought it looked like a small space alien.



House Centipede on the road in Amami Oshima at night

Oh, we also saw some birds at night, especially this [Amami Woodcock](#), another endemic, closely related to the Eurasian Woodcock, about which I will have more to say later.



Amami Woodcock



Ruddy Kingfisher spotlighted on Amami Drive

We also had a wonderful view of a [Ruddy Kingfisher](#). We had seen one briefly on Okinawa, but finally had a good (indeed 5*) view of this one trying to sleep despite the bright lights. Notice the beautiful purplish sheen on the wings.

After three days (and nights!) it was time to leave Amami for the main island of Honshu and the central highlands.

Central Mountains of Honshu (Nagano)

Our flight landed at Haneda airport, one of the two main airports serving the Tokyo area. We picked up a van from Hertz and set off on the freeway, astonishing for someone used to Bay Area traffic. We zoomed along on a level with the fourth floor of the buildings we passed, ticking off a [Northern Goshawk](#) carrying some prey for nestlings as we went. We have seen far more individuals of this species in Asia than we have in the USA for some reason. We also had our only view of Mt. Fuji, just a glimpse, during this drive.

Pension Bergcot

We arrived at Pension Bergcot in an upscale area of weekend homes, many now vacant due to the long somnolent Japanese economy after a stop for dinner at a roadside service area with a food court. We had time for a quick soak before an early bedtime.



Young Varied Tit wants to be fed

Up before breakfast in the morning, we strolled around the area. A begging young Varied Tit was our first new bird of the day.

We also had a stunning look at [Japanese Bush Warbler](#), typically a very shy species, singing from the top of a bush in the garden.



Black Swallowtail Butterfly

Later that morning, we drove thru the local woods, in a very successful search for [Copper Pheasant](#), a bird typically found at higher elevations. Our 5-star view of a male feeding and displaying on the road was thru the

windshield of the van, which eliminated any chance of a good photo. We had to content ourselves with photos of a nice dark swallowtail butterfly and a carnivorous Arum Lily flower, known locally as “Viper Plant.”



Arum Lily, Viper Plant

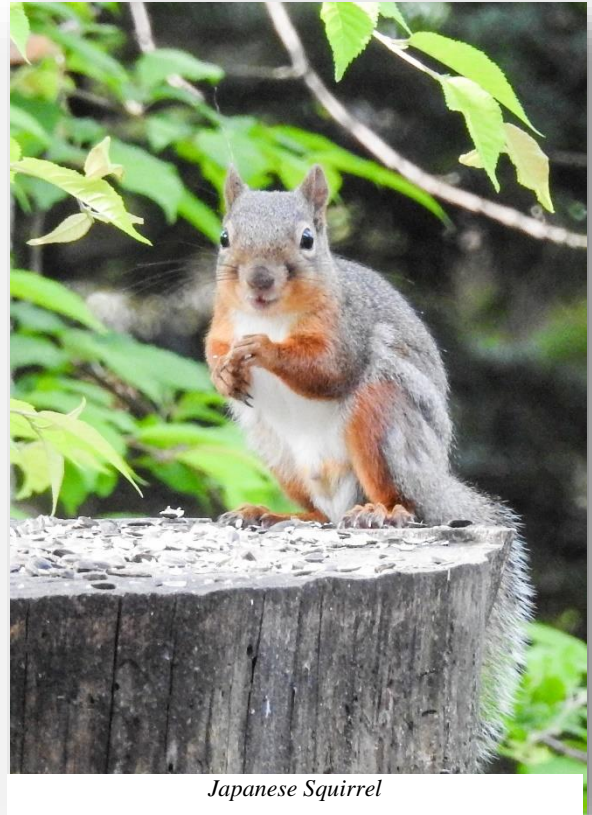


Stunning Damselfly

I was quite taken with this stunning Damselfly. The combination of the electric blue body and the copper wings is unlike any other damselfly I have seen.

The feeders on the deck of the Pension were popular with the local wildlife, particularly the cute [Japanese Squirrel](#).

The highlight of our stay, though, was the nightly visit of [Japanese Badgers](#), *Meles anakuma*, considered by some as a subspecies of Eurasian Badger, *Meles meles*.



Japanese Squirrel



Japanese Badger

[Karuizawa Hotel Belston Court](#)

After two nights at the Pension, we moved to a new location, Hotel Belston Court in the Karuizawa district. This is a marriage destination, with several venues available for the service, the best being an old Christian Church on the grounds of the hotel. Unlike most of the places we stayed in Japan, the room we had here clearly favored newlyweds: The only King Sized beds of the trip, a huge tub that held two people so long as they were prepared to nestle together, and no space to store clothing.

Mark explained that Japanese tourists seldom stay long, usually planning one two days. Since the hotel usually supplies some robes or similar to wear, bringing clothing is not needed, so why waste space on closets. A few hooks on the wall sufficed.

That left some space for the most elaborate toilet we had seen. We Americans have a lot to learn from the Japanese when it comes to personal hygiene. Their public toilets are spotless, even the Men's Room. Nothing, though, comes close to the toilets in luxury hotels, which have numerous controls in Japanese, fortunately with pictures for the unenlightened. I tried to take a picture of the entire fixture, as there were some more controls by the seat. Unfortunately, the seat automatically raised itself whenever I got close, hiding the controls.



I puzzled over the controls at some length. The pictures were a help. The text, of course, was a complete mystery to me. The Japanese writing system, as Mark explained, is probably the most complicated ever invented. There are four distinct scripts used:

1. [Kanji](#) characters. These were adopted directly from Chinese characters. Several of the buttons have these glyphs on them, probably because they are so concise.
2. [Katakana](#). This is a [syllabary](#), a system where each glyph represents a single syllable, or sometimes a vowel. This writing is used for foreign words adopted into Japanese, as well as technical words. The bird names were usually in katakana.
3. [Hiragana](#). This is another syllabary, used for words in Japanese that are not represented by kanji characters.
4. Plain old Latin alphabet, also known as [Romanji](#). This was used for important words, such as *Car Wash* and *diesel*. Hotel and restaurant signs usually were written in our familiar script.

Notice that none of the instructions on the toilet are in *romanji*.

Now, one might ask if one form of writing — not to mention three — represents the language phonetically, why not discard the old kanji, choose one kana, and use it for everything. Tradition seems to be the answer.

The GPS system in the vehicles we rented had controls labeled just like the toilet in a mixture of different scripts. Mark was often unable to work out how to deal with these complexities. Fortunately, Mayumi was able to read more than Mark, but even she sometimes stumbled over unfamiliar kanji characters.

Oh, the toilet was a big hit after we figured out how to use it.

Driving around the Karuizawa area produced two nice photos. We were able to get great views of [Green Pheasant](#), the national bird of Japan. In fact, we saw these beautiful birds several times, usually in pairs, but once a female by herself. That produced an amazing total of 9 pheasants.



(Japanese) Green Pheasant



Fledgling Brown Dipper waiting to be fed

Some [Brown Dippers](#) seen by the side of the road turned out to be three begging young being fed by two overworked adults. Terry got a photo of one bird being fed. I had to be satisfied with a picture of one patiently waiting on a rock.

When I first saw this photo, I thought I had inadvertently turned the camera into monochrome mode, until I noticed the slight touch of color on the rocks in the background.

Tramping thru the woods along a stream produced another fishing spider. This time, I was able to catch the cutie in the act of fishing.



Fishing Spider in Keruiazawa

At night, we had a parting of the ways. I elected to go with the rest of the group to try an Italian restaurant in the area and to celebrate Mark's birthday. I admit I was curious to see what the Japanese version of Italian food was like.

The answer: Not like what you are used to. There was pasta, with tomato sauce and other ingredients, but the rest of the meal followed a typical pattern of small appetizers, etc.

Linda meanwhile elected to go on a night walk to see the [Japanese Flying Squirrel](#). The hotel has several nest boxes set up for the squirrels as they like to move around. I got to listen to a glowing report of what I had missed.

After a couple of nights of luxury, we headed off to the tiny island of Miyake Jima.

[Miyake Jima](#)

The plan was to travel back to Haneda airport and fly to Miyake Jima. The weather didn't cooperate, so we had to fall back on Plan B and take a night ferry. This left us with several hours to kill in the ferry terminal, which had large signs advertising FREE WI-FI in several different scripts.

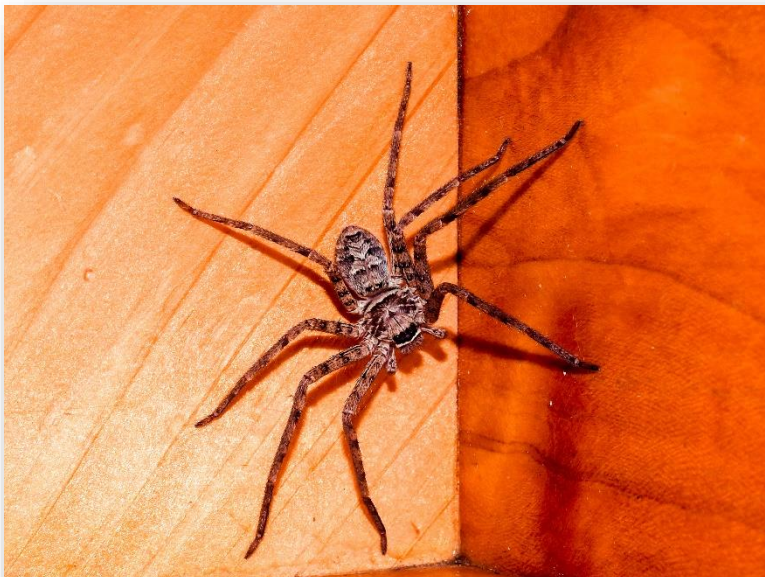
This turned out to be rather more involved than most places. Terry gave up, but I persevered for 90 minutes, trying first my laptop, then my phone, then the two in combination. *Boingo*, an app on my phone finally managed to connect, and I was able to copy the information and get the laptop set up. Seems like a lot of trouble, but there wasn't much else going on.

At least I was able to see how the Warriors were doing in the NBA Playoffs. (More on that later.)

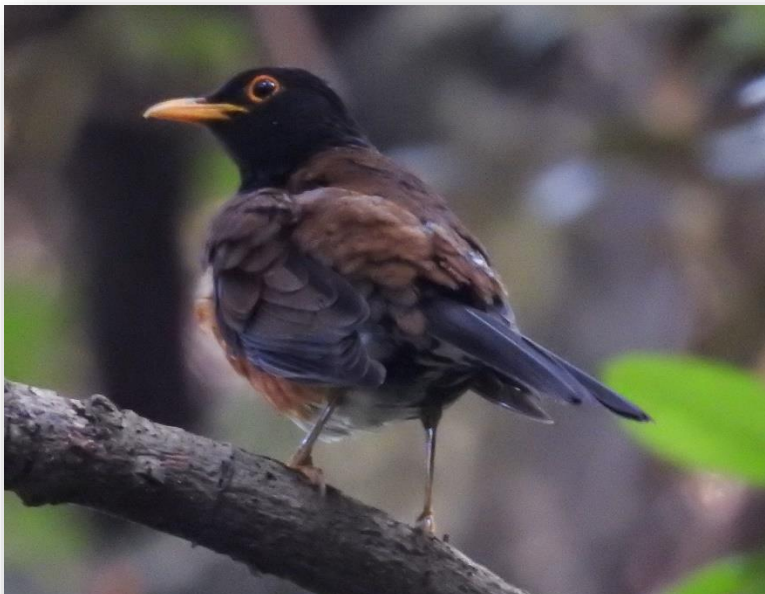
We were able to book the last two cabins with real beds and ensuite facilities. We enjoyed a quick but welcome sleep arriving on the island early in the morning. Here's what the island looks like in Google Earth.



By the way, “jima” is another way of saying “shima” and means “island,” so the name just means Miyake Island. According to Mark, the island is 55 km². Some rough calculations mean that the road around the central volcano is about 27 km long, which was close to the official numbers. The volcano erupted in 2000 and everyone on the island was evacuated for four years. One consequence of that eruption was the elimination of one of the two fresh water ponds on the island. The area indicated near the bottom of the map is the only one left. We spent most of our time walking down a trail from the road to a dock at the water’s edge.



Spider on the stairs at Pension Santomo



Japanese Thrush

First, though, we checked into the Pension Santomo. As we climbed the stairs to our room, Linda spotted this lovely house spider. We photographed it quickly before the host could get rid of it.

Of course, the island is home to a number of endemic species. We saw all of them in our short visit. One of the first was the Japanese Thrush, pictured below. Linda wondered just how many thrushes that look like our Robin we have seen this year.

Typically Japanese, the trail into the woods had a nice toilet at the end, a feature we all appreciated. Naturally, we all opted for the Handicap version, which we think includes all westerners. While there, I noticed a new button, bright red, that I hadn't seen before. "Wonder what that does?" I thought as I pushed it. Turns out it set off an alarm. Fortunately, another push turned it off.

This Thrush chose a wonderful tree as its habitual perch. The **Spirit of the Forest** has lasted 300 years in a difficult spot. The villagers revered the tree and asked for its help in times of trouble, such as when the volcano seemed to be about to erupt. Here's a photo:



The Spirit of the Forest

We liked the tree and chose it for our usual signature photo, which is at the start of this report.



Japanese Robin. Photo by Eric S J Tan

A much more difficult endemic bird was the [Japanese Robin](#), no relation to our robin. Instead, it is a member of the large Eurasian family. A beautiful bird, we finally got a look after chasing it for an hour. We found a good photo that Mark included in a newsletter.

This set the stage for our most difficult endemic search, but one with a great ending.

A small bird Mark called [Pleske's Warbler](#), but which has now apparently been renamed **Styan's Grasshopper-warbler**, migrates from other parts of Asia to breed on this island and a couple of nearby islets and nowhere else.

Mark knew exactly where to look for the bird, a meadow with a viewing platform next to it. It was there — sort of. We saw it flitting back and forth from one hiding spot to another. Finally, all of us had “seen” it and we left for lunch.

We ate an elaborate meal back at the Pension with a large party of ladies, a group of Japanese tourists. Mark explained that Japanese men seldom have time for such trips, so the group is usually composed entirely of women. This one included one token male. Much *sake* was consumed at lunch, leading to a boisterous commotion.

After lunch, we headed out for the afternoon to search for Pleske's warbler again. This produced a stunning look at the bird. First, we cleaned up the earlier sighting when everyone managed to get an open view of the warbler in our binocs.

As we drove off, Mark spotted one singing in a bush by the side of the road. The bird stayed in the same spot when we coasted close to his bush. I managed to get a fabulous photo of this rare and difficult, but admittedly somewhat dull-plumaged bird.



We took the ferry back to the main island, giving us several opportunities for some pelagic birds and mammals. On landing, we made our way to a hotel near Haneda airport, ready to head to Hokkaido in the morning for the final stage of our tour.

Before leaving, though, we all posed for a photo under an arch leading to the courtyard of the Pension. Notice that the establishment is an exception to the rule that hotel signs are usually in *Romanji*. Not many foreign tourists come here. Note also that everyone except Terry has binocs on. It's easy to tell the photographer from the birders.



Bottom row: Mayumi, Jenny, Linda

Top row: Mark, Terry, Jim

Hokkaido

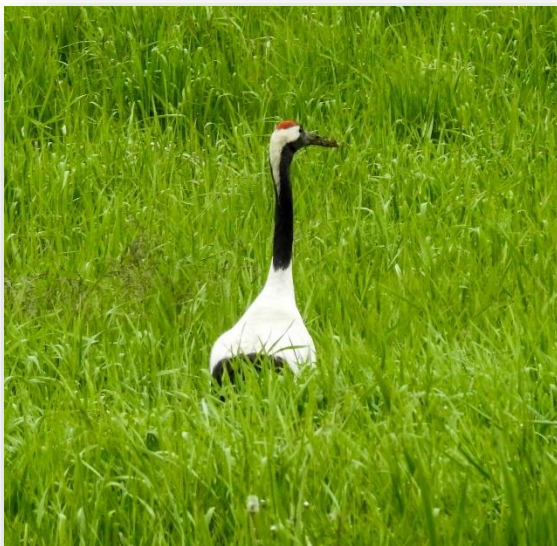
Hokkaido, the farthest north and least populous of the main Japanese Islands, presents quite a contrast to the other areas we visited. Agriculture is prevalent, though apparently tourism is the main source of revenue. We spent our time there at several small Pensions in order to cover the area. Bordered by both the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Okhotsk, with a view of some Russian islands, it provided several opportunities for pelagic trips.

First, though, we stopped off at a roost of a [Ural Owl](#). This was overrun by photographers, who had staked out all the best sight lines. The adult was visible only with branches in the way, preventing a good photo. Fortunately, one of the chicks was more cooperative:



Ural Owl Chick

We saw several [Red-crowned Cranes](#) feeding in the fields. That made for some difficult photo ops. A handsome bird that deserves a better picture:



Red-crowned Crane

We rested in the afternoon to prepare for our hunt for the [Blakiston's Fish Owl](#). After dinner, we made our way to a "Lodge" composed of two large trailers hooked together. The site had been arranged for photographers who, like us, wanted to see what Wikipedia calls "the largest owl in the world."

A special light illuminated a pool in a stream flowing through riparian forest. The pool had been baited with small fish. The lights flashed for 1/800th of a second every 80th of a second. To our eyes, and presumably to the owl's, this had the appearance of a dimly lit scene. To a properly adjusted camera, it appeared as a brief flash.

My camera wouldn't let me set the exposure and timing to the recommended settings. However, I found that I could get some good photos by synchronizing more or less randomly.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The owl declined our invitation on the first night. I had to make do photographing an unknown Orb Weaver that had strung a web by the door to the loo. I when I worked on the photos later, I found that the spider appeared quite different in ambient light or a flash. Here are the two images:



Spider in a flash



Spider in ambient light

I was about to see my 5000th bird and wondered whether the Owl would be the milestone species. We returned to the same spot on the following night and learned that the owl had showed up shortly after we left the previous night.

Meanwhile, we stepped outside where Mark had heard [Eurasian Woodcocks](#). They flew overhead repeatedly, calling. So, even though it was getting dark and we saw mostly silhouettes, it was a “countable tick.” I had my 5000th species. Fortunately, we saw the bird much better the next day.

Most of my milestone birds have been dull brown jobs, while Linda's have been colorful. At least my half of the streak was still alive.

We returned to the photo blind and waited. And waited. Four hours we waited until I heard “There it is!” And saw a wonderful sight. We took many photos of this amazing bird as he snatched one fish after another from the pool. I like the shot on the following page best.

Linda had to wait a couple of days before her milestone arrived in the form of a male [Siberian Rubythroat](#) singing from a small bush.



Blakiston's Fish Owl pouncing on a fish. My 5001th Bird.



Male Siberian Rubythroat in Territorial Display Linda's 5000th Bird.

We took several boat trips from Hokkaido locations that turned up more interesting mammals than birds. On such a trip, we spent a couple of hours accompanying a pod of orcas while they fed. At one point, I counted 23 of them on the surface at the same time. We estimated that there were probably about 40 in the pod altogether. Most of these were females and young. Two males, identified by their tall straight fins, patrolled the edge of the pod nearest the boat, just in case we tried something.

This was a magnificent sighting, but alas, trying to photograph from a boat bobbing up and down proved to be too much for me.

Some more cooperative mammals, **Asian Brown Bears**, appeared on the shore during another outing. All Brown Bears are considered to be one species, *Ursus arctos*, with many subspecies. These are probably [*Ursus arctos beringianus*](#), found on the coastal area around the [Sea of Okhotsk](#). This mother and cub fed on vegetation on the shingle while we watched from a distance.



Mother and Cub Brown Bears, Sea of Okhotsk



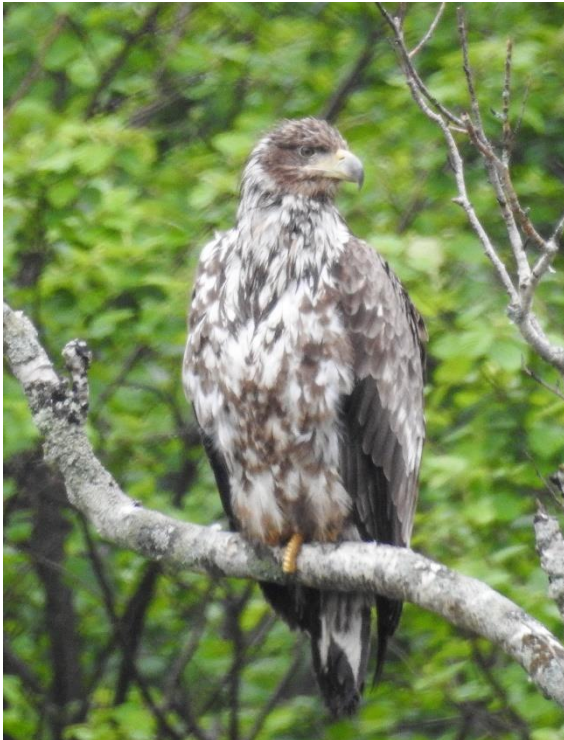
Another nice mammal awaited us when we arrived at our final stop in Hokkaido, a fancy hotel where we enjoyed a fabulous Japanese dinner. This [Eurasian Red Squirrel](#) came to a feeder right outside our window. Although not very red, the tufted ears are enough to distinguish this species from the Japanese Squirrel we saw on Honshu.

[Red Foxes](#) were fairly common on Hokkaido. They look a bit disreputable as they were shedding their winter coats. Here is one happily cleaning up after tourists at a visitor's center near a volcano spewing Sulphur fumes.



Red Fox

Of course, we did see some interesting birds on Hokkaido. [White-tailed Eagles](#), *Haliaeetus albicilla*, were common. This one, a recent fledgling, sat on a tree waiting patiently for its parents to return with some food.



Recently fledged White-tailed Eagle

A [Eurasian \(Northern\) Hobby](#), a small falcon that we have missed on other trips, sat on a wire by the side of the road.



Eurasian (Northern) Hobby



Stejneger's Stonechat with food for Nestlings

This **Stejneger's Stonechat**, a subspecies of **Siberian Stonechat** that may be split someday, was a great treat on our final day of birding. He sat on this reed for quite a while until he decided we weren't a threat. Then he disappeared into the bush with a morsel for his nestlings.

And that was the end of our tour of Japan.

Well, not quite. We had most of a day around Narita before heading for home. Mark asked if we wanted to go on a *twitch*. He had a report of an **Oriental Stork** and thought it was worth a try.

We left early the following morning and spent some time along the river, getting probably the best look ever at **Yellow Bitterns**. Several of them were flying back and forth, with males displaying for the females. We had seen them in Thailand, but not nearly this well.

We added **Marsh Grassbird** and **Japanese Reed Bunting** to the list, both lifers and seen very well.

Then, it was time to go search for the stork. We drove for two hours thru the streets of this massive urban area. When we first encountered Greater Tokyo, I found the traffic amazingly light. That was on the freeway. When we got onto the surface streets, everything was different. We crept along toward our

destination, which was described as "near the Ikea store." Finally, we found the store, perhaps the largest we have ever seen. As we drove across an overpass toward our final target, we saw the stork in the middle of a rice paddy for a tick.

We managed to get quite close; the bird wasn't planning to leave a good feeding spot any time soon. Terry took a good photo of the bird.

This critically endangered species has been extirpated in Japan, though some cling to life in Siberia. This bird, like all Oriental Storks in Japan, was raised in captivity and released. Notice the small spot on the



Oriental Stork on Rice Paddy near Narita, Terry Cloudman photo

crown. It is blue, obvious a bit of dye used to help identify this individual.

“I’m not sure whether we can count this bird,” I opined. “It’s a released bird.”

“Of course we’re counting it!” Mark countered. His view held sway and we added it to the list as our final bird. Then, it was back to the airport, where Linda and I, Terry and Jenny spent the night before flying out the following day. Mark and Mayumi left to return to Hokkaido.

We ate dinner in the restaurant on the top floor of the hotel, which offered *prix fixe* meals, both Japanese and Western. All four of us opted for the Western selection.



Dragonfly seen near Narita before the Mega-twitch. Terry Cloudman Photo

Here is another photo from Terry, on our final day, a dragonfly that I was unable to get a decent image of.

Waiting for our plane, we sat in VIP lounge, nibbling on a few pastries and coffee. “There has to be a good TV in here,” I noted. A search turned one up. The NBA Finals, Game 7, was on, with one person watching. “Are you a Warriors fan?” I asked. “You know it!” was the reply. So, we joined him only to watch LeBron James and his cronies snatch the victory from us in the fourth quarter. Bother!

We flew home on Asiana Air, a Korean line, with a stop in South Korea on the way. We had heard of them before when a pilot flew a plane into the runway at SFO. Despite that history, we liked what we found. The food on the short 2-hour hop to Korea produced one of the best meals of the trip, and the transfer in Incheon was very smooth. A nice way to end this very eventful trip.