

Japan in Spring

May 14-30 2023

Guides Phil Gregory & Jun Matsui

A very good tour with one unexpected event, it was the first since the pandemic and the logistics worked well, flying us still quite pleasant in Japan- I love the way the ground staff all bow to the plane on arrival and departure- they embark and disembark us quickly and there is no nonsense about hand baggage, plus check-in and security are efficient, polite and easy, and the flights are usually on time and they offer multiple apologies over very minor delays, a sharp contrast to airlines in impolite and unhelpful Australia and I suspect the US. Our Toyota Grand Cabin 10-seater vehicle fitted us well, and we hired two small ones on Miyakejima and Ishigaki which also worked just fine with Jun and I driving.

Pax

It was a nice albeit elderly and slow group apart from an initial hiccup where one couple proved quite strange- I got a bad vibe on meeting them in Tokyo, where they seemed surly and withdrawn, and they seemed to find the vehicle, accommodations and food all way below expectations, plus I think the early mornings may have been a shock. They lasted until after the Miyakejima boat trip on Day 5, then we had a very nice restaurant meal where we bought wine to celebrate the Hollidays belated 50th Wedding Anniversary. All seemed fine, then they called me aside and announced they were leaving the tour, the pretext being some glaucoma eye-drops needed to be kept at room temperature and we do not have a cooler on this tour. There had been an earlier outburst about this where I was accused of making David go blind, but we solved it easily enough by buying a small cool pack and getting ice as required. The female was basically way over the top and seemed to have various and variable dietary issues, but we parted amicably enough, and I wished them safe travels. I think these are high-end pampered people and this is not that kind of tour and never has been. Several of the group each told me they thought we'd dodged a bullet as the whole dynamic lifted suddenly. and I could start to enjoy what was going on rather than anticipating the next hand grenade! Ah well, another first, never had anyone quit like that other than for medical or family issues.

Covid

No entry problems and whilst mask wearing was common even outdoors, it was mainly for hay-fever. We did not wear masks on the tour except for some folks in airports.

Food

One woman had variable dietary issues and despite many buffets could not seem to find anything to eat, same in 7/11's where there is a very large range of choices. Thankfully she left..... Everyone else fine with local cafes, 7/11's for some lunches and breakfasts, and buffets at the bigger hotels or simple choices at smaller places. Food is good on this trip but not much western style beyond the odd pizza or pasta place and occasional burgers.

Health

No problems, but three of a somewhat elderly and slow group had hip surgery recovery issues, and Brooke Stevens was quite tottery but very determined, she did OK but this was likely her last tour at age 82.

Hotels

All good but I might change the Route Inn near Mt Fuji as the internet was really bad and the rooms very dark.

Visa

Entry on arrival was easy, I did nothing in advance.

Competition

Briefly met a large Rockjumper group at Funabashi, looked to be 10-12 people.

Changes for 2024

- Ishigaki was worth a look, but we can do better with extra time on Hokkaido, so the two nights can be reallocated to here. I plan to add a cruise from Rausu for brown bears plus whales and dolphins as well as the seabird trip, and we can use more time around Nemuro.
- Jun and I are thinking of going to the Bonin Islands after the tour, it will take about a week and is basically by boat, so very good for seabirds like Short-tailed Albatross, Bonin Petrel, Bannerman's Shearwater and of course the endemic Bonin Honeyeater and Bonin Wood Pigeon. Essentially, I suggest we just see if anyone is interested and can offer it as a private extension, I can't see it being suitable for most.
- No changes otherwise, and keeping the day around Tokyo for shorebirds and the rare Marsh Grassbird.

This tour runs much as the *Japan in Winter* trip, with Jun Matsui as driver guide and cultural interpreter, and Phil as guide and general facilitator, using the 10-seater Grand Cabin Van which fits us all in quite well. The summer itinerary includes both the Izu and Ryukyu Islands, at a nice time of year there and good for butterflies too, and this year we went to Ishigaki as well as Amami and Okinawa which proved an interesting diversion. It was a late spring, so some northern migrants were not yet back, but Hokkaido was looking lovely in the spring greenery, a far cry from winter starkness, and the Ochiishi boat trip was a great success, albeit as always cold and damp on the way back!

This was our second iteration of the tour and first since the pandemic, it ran smoothly and we did very well, narrowly avoiding typhoon Mawar which hit not long after the tour finished. The weather was pretty good throughout, neither too hot nor too wet, and Hokkaido was very nice indeed.

We began around Tokyo, going out to a site for the rare **Marsh Grassbird**, which was a lifer for Phil, with **Ochre-rumped (Japanese Reed) Bunting** as a bonus, and an excellent trip to Funabashi which got us some very nice shorebirds including the scarce *osculans* race of **Eurasian Oystercatcher**, **Great Knot**, **Terek Sandpiper**, **Siberian (Lesser) Sand Plover** and **Sanderling**. Heading up to Mt Fuji we tried at a site where **White-bellied Green Pigeons** come

to drink seawater but were just too late due to the Tokyo traffic. Mt Fuji had quite a bit of snow remaining, but we got good looks at Japanese **Leaf Warbler**, **Grey-bellied Bullfinch**, **Japanese Accentor** and **Red-flanked Bluetail**, with **Japanese Thrush** being very uncooperative this year and not showing well. A dusk foray gave great looks at **Grey Nightjar** and a neat bonus of **Raccoon Dog** on the way back. The lower altitude forests gave the gorgeous **Narcissus** and **Blue & White Flycatcher**, a very wary **Asian Stubtail** and **Chestnut-cheeked Starling** but we dipped on **Japanese Yellow Bunting**.

Next came the overnight boat trip to Miyakejima in the Izu Islands, where it was overcast and very threatening but did not turn into rain until we had sailed again on the return. **Izu Thrush** and **Izu Robin** showed well, and **Styan's (Pleske's) Grasshopper Warbler** was great, whilst the rare **Japanese Wood Pigeon** also showed well. **Owston's Tit** was once again hard, but we got it eventually, and a nice bonus was good numbers of **Streaked Shearwaters** both from the island and from the cabins on the way. back.

The Ryukyu Islands (Nansei Shoto) were next, starting on Amami where we saw **Owston's Woodpecker** drumming on a metal pole(!), Ruddy Kingfisher calling well and **Whistling Green Pigeon** with its atmospheric and beautiful flute-like song on the first afternoon. That night we had our first attempt at seeing **Ryukyu Scops Owl**, which was calling close by but stayed hidden, however **Amami Woodcock** showed well and almost got stepped on in the dark later when we were after the owl, it clattered up suddenly and the wings brushed my head! **Amami Black Rabbit** was another excellent find, doing much better thanks to the mongoose busters eradication program. Ni sign on either island of the Ryukyu Giant Rat or Ryukyu Spiny Rat, both of great interest but elusive, and there are some rare frogs to try for as well. The only snake we saw was a himei-habu curled up in a tree root on Amami.

Next day we managed to get **Lidth's Jay**, which was being rather furtive, no doubt breeding, and tried various areas for **Amami Thrush** without success, though **Ryukyu Minivet** showed well as did **Ryukyu (Amami) Robin** and briefly **Japanese Paradise-Flycatcher**. A nocturnal trip that evening only had one taker, but boy did we do well, with spotlit **Lidth's Jay**, **Ruddy Kingfisher** and best of all **Amami Thrush**, found as we failed again to see several nearby **Ryukyu Scops Owl**. The evening ended with the score of close but unseen Ryukyu Scops Owl 4 Birders 0, but another **Amami Woodcock** right by the main road junction was pleasing.

Okinawa was next and proved excellent, with great looks at **Okinawa Rail**, the rare **Okinawa Woodpecker**, **Okinawa Robin**, **Ryukyu Scops Owl (finally)**, **Japanese (Pryer's) Scops Owl**, **Northern Boobook** and **Japanese Paradise Flycatcher**. Paddyfields at Kin near Naha proved rewarding with **Little Ringed Plover**, a late migrant **Broad-billed Sandpiper** and the rare **Black Drongo**, both being bonus J-ticks for Phil, and the first **Light-vented Bulbuls** of the tour.

Ishigaki was next on the tour with a brief stop at a small island called Yoron on the flight over. Ishigaki is a popular island for beaches and fishing and looked quite prosperous. We visited some paddyfields once we'd checked into our high-tech hotel which used passcodes for everything and had no receptionists at all, but was comfortable and best of all had a washing machine and dryer in each room. The rice fields gave **Cinnamon Bittern**, **Sharp-tailed Sandpiper**, **White-breasted Waterhen** and **Oriental Pratincole**. We headed up to a Hillside Observatory viewpoint, then went to a nearby park, finding a very obliging **Crested (Iriomote**

or **Ryukyu) Serpent Eagle** sat atop a light pole. This caused a bit of a traffic jam as various folks stopped to see what we were looking at, and it was the only one we saw. The park had **Ruddy Kingfisher** but the hoped for Iriomote and Ishigaki (Japanese) tits were not in evidence. I was well impressed by the local race *osai* of what is supposed to be **Large-billed Crow** but looks and sounds quite different and is as distinct as any of the Australian corvid species, one in the bank for sure. **Ryukyu Flycatcher** finally showed as well, with several fine males, one that had eluded us thus far.

We explored up on Mt Omoto next day, seeing **Japanese Paradise Flycatcher, Ruddy Kingfisher, Ryukyu Minivet** and lots of **Warbling White-eye**, plus Stimpson's Skink, and lizard called *Diploderma polygonatum ssp. ishikagiense*, plus a rescue of a Ryukyu Yellow-margined Box Turtle from a drain. There were also some spectacular swallowtails of several species, and a huge black and white butterfly known as a Paper Kite at the park area we went to later. This did also give the very distinctive *nigriloris* race of Japanese Tit, another split in waiting.

Finally it was time for wonderful Hokkaido, where birding at a park near Kushiro gave us **Sakhalin Leaf Warbler, Eurasian Treecreeper** and **Eurasian Nuthatch**, the white-headed nominate race of **Long-tailed Tit**, and best of all a male **Black Woodpecker** calling and feeding on rotten logs on the ground, and giving great views. **Red-crowned Crane** showed well en route, and Notsuke Peninsula was not the bleak wasteland it is in winter, with flowers this time and some of the migrants back including the hoped for **Siberian Rubythroat**, and our first **White-tailed Eagles** of the trip. We spent the night at the minshuku where **Blakiston's Fish Owl** comes to feed from a fish-stocked pond in the stream outside, and we were lucky as this night the male came in at 2020, with a pair calling for over an hour just behind the minshuku, and two birds at 0200 next morning for those who peeked out then. One of the great birds, just so huge.

Next morning Shiretoko Pass was fog shrouded so we abandoned that and headed down to Ochiishi for the 2-hour boat trip round two nearby islands, in good conditions though with a rain shower on the way back. Alcids were terrific, we had 6 species including multiple **Spectacled Guillemot**, a single of the black plumaged **Pigeon (Kurile) Guillemot**, many **Rhinoceros Auklet, Thick-billed** and **Common Murre** and **Two Ancient Murrelet**; the supporting cast included **Arctic** and **Pomarine Jaeger, Short-tailed Shearwater** and several **Laysan Albatross**, plus fantastic views of **Sea Otters**. This year we were slightly too early for both **Middendorf's** and **Sakhalin Grasshopper Warblers**, it was a late spring, and we dipped on **Latham's Snipe** at a site we were given, though **Masked Bunting** was a nice find.

This basically concluded our very enjoyable and successful second iteration of the Field Guides spring trip to Japan, my thanks to the group for good company, enthusiasm and good spotting, and to Ruth at Field Guides and Sue and Rowan at *Sicklebill Safaris* who handled the logistics.. Particular thanks to my local co-leader Jun Matsui, who handled much of the driving and knew some great spots for the special birds, also for his cultural expertise and patience with this group of barbarians. We learned a lot about food and meals too, a very instructive experience.

Sicklebill

Topaz June 2023