



# OKINAWA IN ONE AND HALF DAYS –

## UPDATE INFORMATION FOR VISITING BIRDERS

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In June 2010, I had less than two days to visit Yanbaru, Northern Okinawa, in order to try to see as many endemics of the Ryukyu Islands as possible in the short time, with three main target species: **Okinawa Rail**, **Okinawa Woodpecker** and **Ryukyu Robin**. The following notes on the visit have been made to help other visiting birders with update information. It took me some time to find accommodation and to decide what to do, and my experiences will hopefully provide a welcome shortcut for others.

I arrived in Tokyo on the 4<sup>th</sup> of June, at 7.30 AM and hurried to the Haneda (domestic) airport shuttle (Airport Limousine Bus). The bus left at 8.45 AM and reached Haneda in 80 minutes (10.05 AM). There was little traffic on the way and we could drive as fast as possible. At Haneda terminal 2 there was a long check in line for my All Nippon Airways (ANA) flight to Naha, Okinawa, but no real hurry as they were not going to start boarding before 11.15. My bag weighed 22 kilos, but they kindly did not charge me for the extra weight (21-30 kg, yen 2.000). On board the Boeing 737, no free food or drinks but one was allowed to bring them in, including water and soft drinks. A pleasant flight altogether – I was even able to have a nap. Approaching Naha, the plane had to fly some distance (30 km!) low over the sea, because U.S. military demands this. They are in control of radar on the island. The extra maneuver means an extra risk, extra fuel and longer flight time.

Very hot and humid on arrival, I sweated like a pig, as we say in Finland. Budget Rent-a-Car representatives were not there to meet me on arrival, and there were no signs for car rental. The information desk did not know where one is supposed to wait for rental agency pickups. I had to call them and wait. Afterwards, it was a shortish drive to the office and a slow process with the documents. Nothing was ready for me, even though I had informed them that I would be in a hurry. Eventually, I got my automatic Toyota Allion A18. The navigator was a bit basic and not 100% accurate, but it took through the city to the toll road to Nago (toll gate fee 1.000 yen).

When I left the rental agency, the man in charge said that it would take more than 4 hours to reach Kunigami Village (=Hentona), my final destination. If that was true, I would have been there well after sunset and would really have struggled with my timetables. Fortunately, the driving time was a mere 2 hours, excluding a short stop at a roadside supermarket, to buy the next day's snacks. The speed limits were ridiculously low, 30-40 km/h in inhabited areas (also when there was about one house per km) and only 80 km/h on the 'fast lane' toll road. Most drivers drove faster than that, about 100 km/h, despite the steep speeding fines of Japan. A pair of **Roseate Terns** and two **Red-bellied Rock Thrushes** were seen as I approached the Kunigami Village.



**Fig. 1.** Haneda Airport, Terminal 2.



**Fig.2.** My Kunigami Hotel dinner – excellent! Everything was fresh and very well prepared.

The accommodation I had arranged was Kunigami Hotel ([www.kunigami-shoko.jp/?p=99](http://www.kunigami-shoko.jp/?p=99)), which is located right in the center of Kunigami. It looked more comfortable than Miyashiro, the other budget option recommended by Mark Brazil in the Japan guidebook (Thank you, Kari Haataja, for the copies! Map also at [www.birdtours.co.uk/tripreports/japan/japan6/japan-may-2006.htm](http://www.birdtours.co.uk/tripreports/japan/japan6/japan-may-2006.htm)). There was also more parking space. The room rate was 5.250 yen per night, for a second floor room with a large and comfortable bed and air conditioning, breakfast included. With dinner, the rate was 6.300 yen. The nights were peaceful despite the central location, the calls of a **Japanese Scops Owl** and a single cockroach (once) in the room being the only disturbances. I had a wonderful dinner soon after arrival, but could not finish it. There serving was pretty large, with plenty of delicious variety such as fresh vegetables (**Fig. 2**).

The reservation had been made earlier by phone (tel. (0980) 41-2115), with the gracious help of a Japanese PhD student and friend, Akira Endo, and he had also discussed my food preferences with the manager. The Kunigami Hotel apparently has no email and one needs to call them. The owner claims that he does not speak English, but he did just fine with the necessary words and sentences, just like his son, and I would expect that making the reservation by phone in English would also be possible. The Japanese apparently prefer to avoid any risk of disappointment and therefore prefer to discuss the details in advance in their own language, if possible.

Right after my dinner, I did a short evening trip to Terukubi Rindo (signposted off highway 2) 7.30 - 9.10 PM. I was pretty tired after the long flights from Helsinki to Frankfurt to Tokyo and Okinawa, plus the four hours on Okinawa afterwards, but was keen to start scoring with my target species; birds, mammals and snakes. It had started to rain and was eager to score with **Ryukyu Scops Owl** in case it was going to be worse the next night. At that point, I did not know that the rain would continue till the end of my visit in the forests of Yanbaru, with one 30 minute sunny break the next day. Plenty of frogs (2 species) were seen on the road and one pretty but feisty **Habu**, the dreaded local killer snake which effectively prevents any off road exploration, day or night. Most importantly, there were two calling **Ryukyu Scops Owls** in the forest by the road despite the rain, and a single **Ryukyu Collared Fruit Bat**. The forest road was narrow but with perfect tarmac.

On the **5<sup>th</sup> June**, the next day, I woke up at 3.55 AM, collecting my large breakfast sandwiches (prime beef, high quality cheese, fresh bread) at the downstairs fridge and leaving at 4.15. Everything had to be done in a proper way if I was supposed to find any endemics in the one full day available. With the weather, I must admit that I was anything but sure to score with any of them, excluding perhaps the **Okinawa Rail**. The rain was steady and the sky grey.

Before sunrise, Okuni Rindo (signposted, did only the first 2 km) produced a smart and confiding **Ryukyu Long-tailed Giant Rat** on the road, about 300 meters from the main road (2). Then, between 5 and 9.45 AM, it was time to focus on Terukubi Rindo, the main site for the endemics. All three target species - **Okinawa Rail**, **Okinawa Woodpecker** and **Ryukyu Robin** were located with relative ease. A half an hour break of sunshine at 8.45 was one key to success, with great views of two of endemic species (see below). Plenty of frogs, a 30 cm long worm and a greyish brown slug of a size of a sausage. At 10.15 I had a two and half hour break, driving down to the sunny coast for shopping groceries and birding the fields between Kunigami Village and Oku.





**Fig.3.** Light rain at Terukubi Rindo – good birdwatching from the car. See the tarmac road.



**Fig.4.** Dense rain at Terukubi Rindo – not possible to see anything.

From Oku I drove towards Hiji Falls (signposted at coastal highway), turning up left just before the first parking area and driving up to the top of the road, where a right hand turn of a T-crossing lead to two impressive bridges over forested valleys, with rather promising views for pigeons.

**Morning birds** (\* indicates and endemic/restricted range species)

**Intermediate Egret:** 1 on a coastal rice field.

\***Okinawa Rail:** 5 seen and about 10 heard at the Terukubi Rindo track, with plenty of photography opportunities had there been enough light for my pocket camera! One more individual on the lower highway 2, in a place with stream on the north side and a rail warning sign on the opposite one. No stress with this easy to see, colorful species!

**Common Moorhen:** An adult with three chicks in a rice field at Oku.

**Rock Pigeon:** 1 in Oku.

**Oriental Turtle Dove:** 5 *stimpsoni* between Hiji Falls and Oku.

\***Ryukyu Green Pigeon:** 4 *permagnus* with close views during the sunny break at Terukubi Rindo; appeared to bask in the sun.

\***Ruddy Kingfisher:** At least 6 *bangsi* calling and great views of a single at the above-mentioned highway 2 rail site.

\***Okinawa Woodpecker:** 4, with one too close for binoculars during the sunny break, when it climbed up (still only at 1,5 m height) to inspect me and to warm up in the sun. All **Okinawa Woodpeckers** were noticed by their calls. It appears to be a relatively noisy species, at least this time of the year. The best area was a forested section of the Terukubi forest road with several sharp bends, some distance from the start but well before the grassy openings (favored by rails).

**Large-billed Crow:** about 30 individuals, common.

\***Ryukyu Robin:** about 40 *namiyei* at Terukubi Rindo, out of which four males and one female were seen with splendid views. The rainy weather kept these beautiful birds on the roadsides, singing and foraging in the leaf litter.

**Red-bellied Rock Thrush:** 7.

**Pacific Swallow:** 5 *namiyei* on the coast.

**Zitting Cisticola:** about 20 *brunniceps* in roadside grass Kunigami – Oku.

**Chinese Bulbul:** about 15 *orii* on trees and wires between Oku and Hiji Falls.

**Brown-eared Bulbul:** over 50.

**Japanese Bush Warbler:** 1 singing *restricta* at Terukubi Rindo.

**Japanese White-eye:** over 40; subspecies *loochoensis*.

**Tree Sparrow:** about 40 Kunigami – Oku.

A well deserved two hour nap was had in the hotel room before another run at 3 PM. I went to Terekubi Rindo and Fungawa Dam, but the conditions were simply too difficult for birdwatching. Heavy rain and wind with flooding roads and falling branches was the order of the afternoon, and I returned to the above-mentioned valley bridges above the Hiji Falls. In there, the conditions were significantly more tolerable, even though far from ideal. On the road up, another Ryukyu endemic was spotted during a rainless break.





Fig.5. One of the many Okinawa Rail signs...



Fig.6. ...and the bird itself. Not enough light for my camera even though the rails walked around the car!

## Afternoon birds

\***Okinawa Rail**: 2 calling at the bridges.

\***Ryukyu Green Pigeon**: 2 fly-bys seen at the bridges.

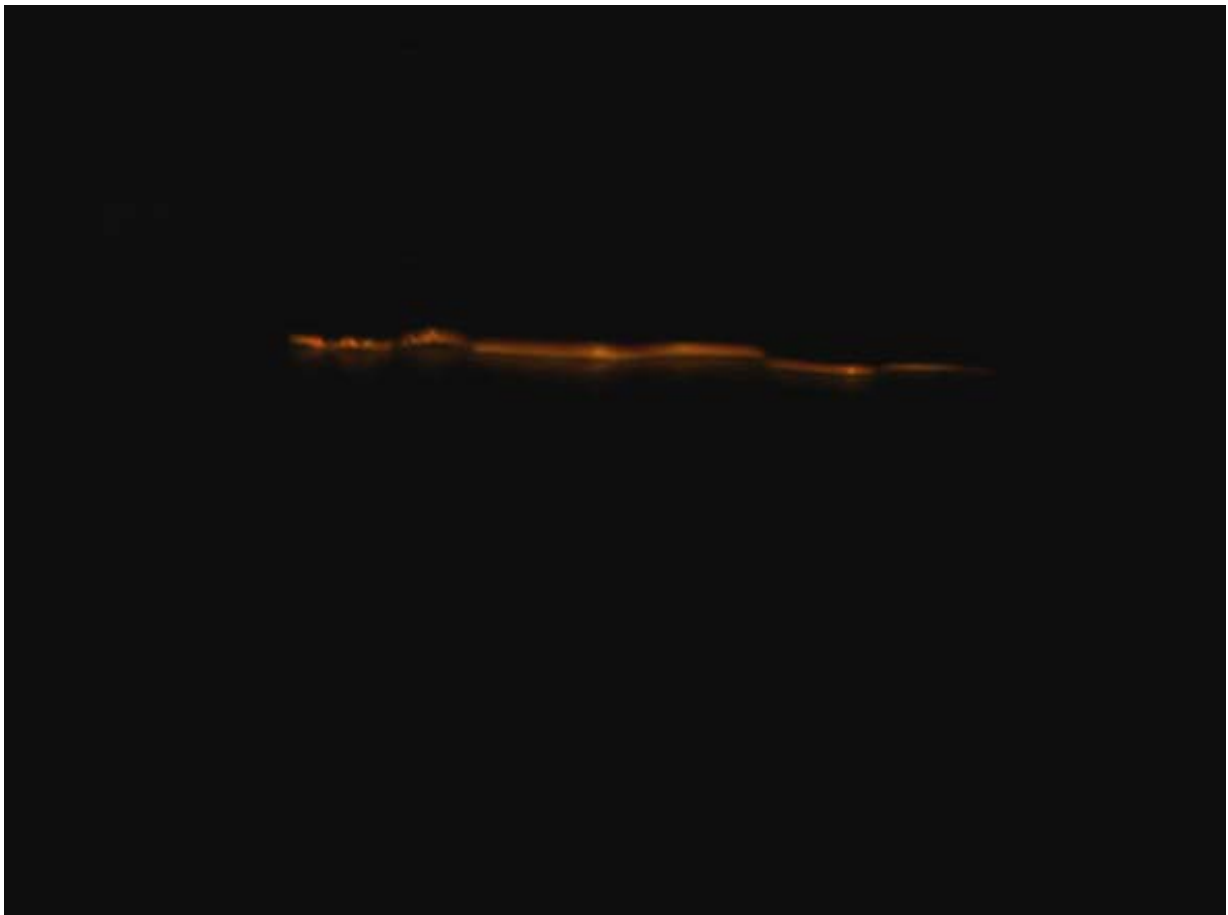
**Oriental Turtle Dove**: 5.

\***Ryukyu Minivet**: One rather tame male too close for my camera, in the beginning of the road above Hiji Falls. The minivet proved to be surprisingly rare, probably because of weather conditions which did not favor canopy species, or **Ryukyu Flycatcher** (the one I missed).

\***Ryukyu Robin**: 1 male singing next to the second parking lot at Hiji Falls.

+ a few of the above-mentioned common species.

I stayed on the bridges till sunset, even though not much could be seen in the rain. The search for **Japanese Scops Owl** started at Hiji Falls, where constant alertness was necessary even on the tarmac of a parking lot, after spotting a large **Habu** at a close distance. You do not hear them. Then to the exorbitant Okuni Resort in Oku ( one **Japanese Scops Owl**, too briefly) and to sleep at the Kunigami Hotel. No time for dinner today, but I had plenty to eat and drink in my car. At night, I was not able to sleep at all, despite a determined effort. On arrival, I had been so exhausted of travel that sleeping was easy, to say the least. The second night, the jet lag hit with a full force. Another **Japanese Scops Owl** was calling by the hotel, keeping me company till the 'wee hours'.



**Fig. 7.** The large **Habu** at Hiji Falls, passing uncomfortably close at a parking lot.

On the **6<sup>th</sup> of June**, I did not have much time for birdwatching, because I had to return my car by 9 AM in Naha to be able to catch my ANA morning flight to Narita International Airport, Tokyo. There was just enough for a short (1,5 h) visit to Terukubi Rindo, after which the two hour drive to Naha was started. This really was worth my while, when a surprise **Amami Woodcock** appeared on the main (2) road, about 3 km from the coast, prospecting on leaf litter accumulated by yesterday's floods!! What a great feeling after the sleepless night! Quite a good luck with this scarce species in such a short time – people who see an **Amami Woodcock** in Okinawa normally do a lot more driving on the Yanbaru forest roads. Other good birds included:

**\*Okinawa Rail:** at least 10 on the road at Terukubi Rindo and 1 again along highway 2, at the same location.

**\*Ruddy Kingfisher:** 2.

**\*Pryer's Woodpecker:** 1.

**\*Ryukyu Robin:** 13.

The highlight of the drive to Naha was a **Japanese Wood Pigeon** at Kinby Bay (**Rock Pigeons** were also around). Quite unexpectedly, another one was seen at the Naha Airport, while waiting for the flight! Cracking sunshine views of the pigeon which crossed the runway, flying low and slow against wind, along the coast. The black undersides of the wings create a nice effect. The airport had a few other birds, too:

**Black-crowned Night-Heron:** 1 ad (another ad flew across a highway in Naha).

**Pacific Reef Heron:** 5

**Black-naped Tern:** 2

**White-rumped Munia:** 1

All in all, a short visit very well spent, even though not everybody would have enjoyed the 'bird race style' pace. I loved it, despite the lack of sleep! At the end of the day, I am not sure if the continuous rain was a curse or blessing. I did not give up and probably therefore made it a blessing. In birdwatching, it is oftentimes best to cope with the conditions and have a go with it.

That evening in Chitose, Hokkaido, I fell in a deep sleep the moment my head hit the pillow...







Fig. 8. Traffic lights at Nagu, with 'cubicle cars', the current favorite in Japan.

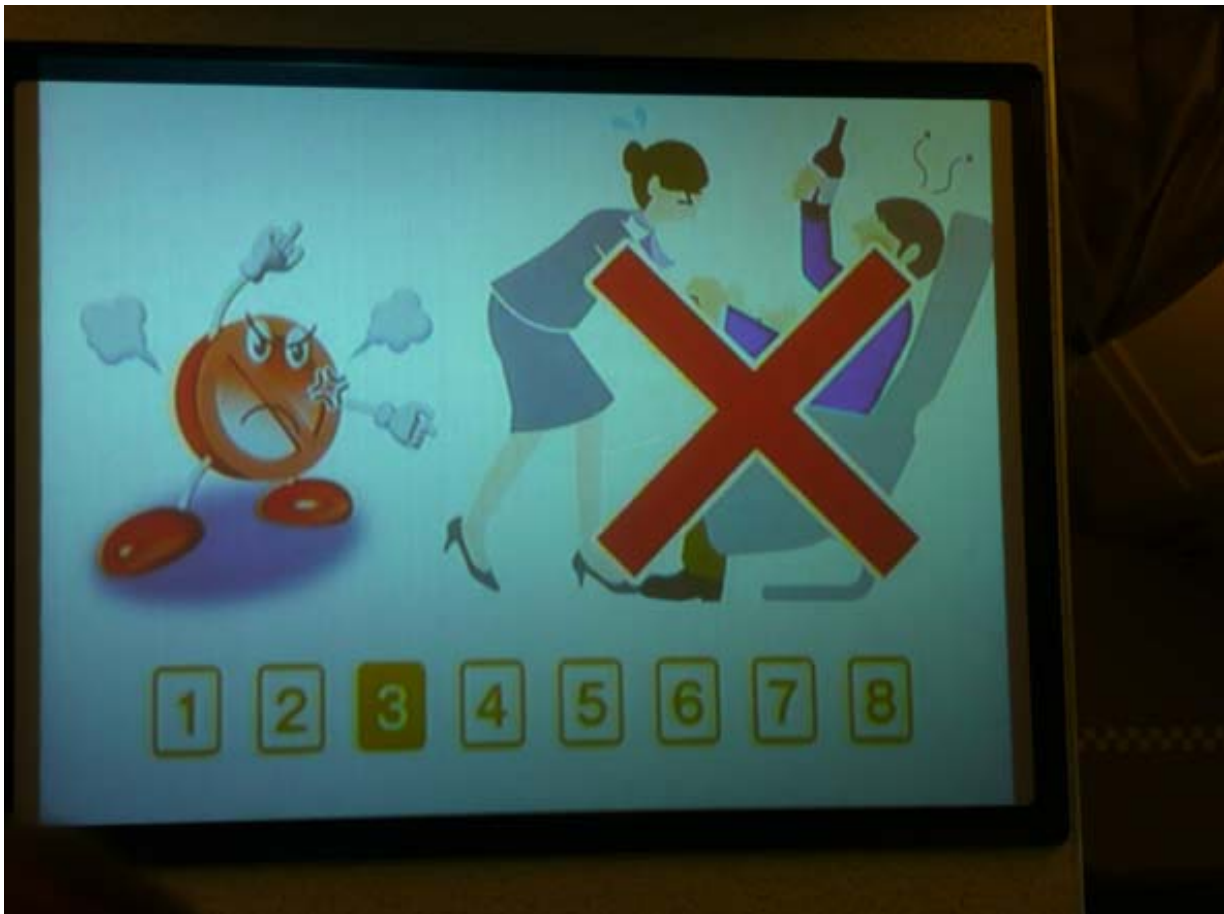


Fig. 9. ANA shows the men how NOT to behave on board, in a graphic way. As you see, 8 slides altogether...