



# EAST HOKKAIDO IN JUNE 2010 – UPDATE INFORMATION FOR VISITING BIRDERS

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**Fig. 1.** The colors of early June in Hokkaido, with a freshly arrived **Siberian Rubythroat**.

Most foreign birdwatchers visit East Hokkaido in winter, in order to look for the large concentrations of sea-eagles and wintering seabirds. Winter is, however, not the only good birding season in the North of Japan. On the contrary, late spring—early summer offers some of the best birds and weather conditions. There are no biting insects, most of the trees have fresh leaves, spring flowers bloom, together with cherry trees, the air has a fragrant smell, the bird singing season is at its peak and early breeders such as **Red-crowned Cranes** already have the first young

ones on the marshlands. Such were the conditions during my visit to Hokkaido between 7<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> June, in 2010.

## **PRACTICALITIES**

The most convenient gateway to East Hokkaido is the city of Kushiro. There are a number of convenient domestic flight connections there from the southern metropolises, such as Tokyo (Haneda Airport; 90 min with a shuttle bus from Narita). I myself had other plans around Sapporo and preferred to fly there, with an All Nippon Airways (ANA) directly from Narita. On arrival, a night was spent at the Wing International Hotel in central Chitose, close to the airport. The hotel had good rooms for a competitive rate, if reserved with Agoda, full hd television and free airport shuttle. They were very welcoming, even though my appearance in field gear probably did not fit in their normal customer profile, the local businessmen. Breakfast was not included in the room rate, and I said so, nevertheless got a packed breakfast the next morning, for free!

The main problem with visiting Hokkaido was car rental. Rental agencies have limited office hours and do not serve morning or evening flights, not even at the Sapporo International Airport, or for an extra charge. Furthermore, they do not have cars at the airport. One has to shuttle to their local offices, fortunately not far away. Consequently, car rental was very time-consuming. These problems came as a surprise – I had expected Japan to be more modern in this sense. I could not pick my car on arrival (should have arrived earlier) but had to get a hotel room in Chitose. The next morning, I could not go birdwatching, but had to travel to Toyota Rent-a-Car Poplar office and wait till 8 AM to get my car (in June, the best birding hours have already been lost at that time). To add insult in the injury, the English-speaking person who had promised to meet me there did not arrive on time.

On return, I had to stop birdwatching a full 12 hours earlier than planned and spend another (otherwise unnecessary) night in Chitose. It was not allowed to just drop the car at the office parking area, even though it was open with space for 100 vehicles. One had to return the car in person. Having known of the rigid service beforehand, I would have flown directly to Kushiro, and skipped Sapporo altogether, or reserved an extra day for the rental procedures. The rental agency

also had no shuttle service to Chitose hotels, contrary to their website information. The taxi was 1.750 yen, one way. The toll roads to the east and back cost me 10.000 yen. All said, the car (Toyota Corolla A10X) itself was fine and its navigation system (in English) clear and accurate. I never got lost, not even in Sapporo.



**Fig.2.** My Toyota Rent-a-Car Toyota Corolla A10X at Shiretoko Pass, East Hokkaido (snow in June).

The other problem I experienced was the difficulty of obtaining up-to-date information. The sold out (and a bit outdated) Guidebook for Birdwatching in Japan by Mark Brazil provides some good guidelines (Thank you, Kari Haataja for mailing me photocopies of the Hokkaido section!), but there is surprisingly little information in the Internet, also in Japanese. Birdwatching is, after all, not that common in Hokkaido, yet. Also the local 'birdingpals' were a disappointment. Therefore, knowledgeable locals such as Mr. Takeyoshi Matsuo ('Take'), who runs the Furen Lodge at Lake Furen, are especially valuable. He replied emails and readily provided both up-to-date and realistic

information in regard to my target species. The pre-visit information was valuable in planning the timetables. The Furen Lodge proved to be an ideal basis for birdwatching in the region and I spent all my nights there, excluding the two 'wait-for-us-to-deliver' nights in Chitose.



**Fig. 3.** Breakfast at Furen Lodge. Notice the high quality toast, no added sugar!

The Japanese people were in general very polite and helpful, a pleasure to deal with. The roads were in excellent condition and well signed, and gas readily available, just like food in the many well-stocked shops and supermarkets. The quality of food was very high, as expected, and the majority of it agreed with my taste. The accommodation at Furen Lodge (email [matsuo-t@plum.plala.or.jp](mailto:matsuo-t@plum.plala.or.jp)) included a breakfast and a dinner, with local specialties and more familiar food items, including home-made liquor! The room with half board was 5.600 yen per night. I had purchased a Shobunsha Road Atlas and carried a few pages with me, but seldom needed them. For bird reference purposes, Mark Brazil's *Birds of East Asia* proved to be more than adequate.

## BIRDWATCHING SITES

### Kawayu

It was a long drive from Sapporo to Kawayu, but I eventually arrived there, without hitting any animals on the road. **Red Foxes** are a common sight in East Hokkaido in June, with many cute signs reminding the drivers to not to drive over them and their 'friends', such as **Raccoon Dogs**.

Birdwatching was started by an afternoon visit to Wakoto Peninsula, on the southern shore of Lake Kussharo (a beautiful volcano lake). Do not believe the guidebook but continue past the large parking area with shops and a public toilet until you arrive at a camp site parking area, right at the beginning of the Wakoto loop trail. Also, it is not an 'hour's hike', as stated by Brazil, even though the trail is easy (**Fig. 4**). If a visiting birdwatcher is actually watching and identifying the (unfamiliar and at times difficult to see) birds, one is likely to spend two to three hours for the 3 km long walk.

A non-poisonous **Japanese Rat-Snake** provided some excitement on the trail. The best birds included a **Black Woodpecker** (common where I live), a singing **Japanese Thrush** and a good variety of other woodpeckers, tits and flycatchers. At night (second visit), an **Oriental Scops Owl** was actively calling by the entrance to the campsite. Looking back, I would have spent my time better by focusing on the eastern shore of Lake Kussharo, on the road to Kawayu village(see below), also on the first visit. Wakoto Peninsula was a nice place but there were not many birds.

On my second visit, I drove from Lake Furen to Kawayu after sunset, windows open for the most of the time. **Gray's Grasshopper Warblers** were common by the road, with 26 singing males, whereas **Lanceolated Warblers** (4 males) were only heard at one marshy meadow, between Attoko and Bekkai-Cho. In comparison, about 15 **Latham's Snipes** adorned the night with their scratchy displays. The species is common in agricultural areas.



**Fig. 4.** The Wakoto Peninsula trail.



**Fig. 5.** Lake Kussharo, a scenic volcano lake with hot springs (add a hint of sulfurous aroma).



**Fig. 6.** The east shore lakeside road to Kawayu Village. There is a variety of forest types there.

This time, I focused on the 15 km eastern lakeside road which goes from highway 243 to Kawayu Village, via several hot springs and both conifer and broad-leafed forests. Predawn, 1 calling **Ural Owl**, 4 **Hazel Grouse** and 16 **Scaly Thrush** were noted. The best mammals were a smart **Japanese Marten** and a **Raccoon Dog**.

At sunrise, things got very busy, the large numbers of common species (**Eastern Crowned Warbler** 50+, **Narcissus Flycatcher** 30+, **Nuthatch** 30+) actually disturbing my search for the target species. I nevertheless had great views of an adult **Japanese Thrush** and **Grey-bellied Bullfinches**, in addition to **Oriental Cuckoos**, **Olive-backed Pipits**, **Japanese Robins**, **Siberian Blue Robins** and **Red-flanked Bluetails**. A pair of **Hawfinches** was seen, but neither **Japanese Grosbeaks** nor **Varied Tits**, even though I played my recordings a lot.



**Fig. 7. Slaty-backed Gull**, one of the common coastal birds of Hokkaido, at Lake Furen. The building in the background is one in a row of lakeshore houses which also has the Furen Lodge.



## Around Furen Lodge

Located on the shore of Lake Furen, the Furen Lodge is right in prime birdwatching habitat. Early in the morning, many common species such as **Black-browed Reed Warblers** are easy to observe at the lodge. A short walk away, there are tidal flats with numerous gulls, wildfowl and shorebirds, such as **Far Eastern Curlew**. Few hundred meters towards Nemuro, there is the Tubai Information Center with an adjacent mixed forest with a nature trail. This was the best site for **Grey-bellied Bullfinch**, a stunning endemic (sub)species of Hokkaido. The birds looked clearly darker than in Brazil's Birds of East Asia, with blackish grey back and belly, and rather contrasting red throat. The forest is likely to have many other good species, but I did not go further than 20 meters in, having already seen all the other ones! The close by Onneto Bridge had the largest concentration of wildfowl, particularly **Greater Scaup** and **Eurasian Wigeon**. It is one of the key sites in winter. A few pairs of **Red-crowned Cranes** breed in the vicinity and were easily seen.

## Cape Nosappumisaki

At the easternmost point of Nemuro Peninsula one arrives at a site with a great arch and 'eternal fire' commemorating the Kurile Islands, occupied by Soviet Union/Russia since the end of WWII. Having family land in the occupied Finnish Karelia, I well understood the feelings of the hundreds of daily visitors at the shrine. They also knew about Karelia and shared a common view of Russian's need to rectify Stalin's crimes by returning these regions to their rightful owners.

Nevertheless, instead of shouting 'banzai' at the shrine, I proceeded to the nearby small lighthouse, a perfect seabird observation site. The next day, the U.S. and Japanese Navy did the job for us, by bombarding the Nemuro Strait with heavy artillery for a full day. One could hear the shots over 100 km away and feel the pressure of bombardment half of the distance! I wonder how the Russian frontier guards felt on the islands, so close to the action...

The great thing about Cape Nosappumisaki is that site is so easily accessible (free parking right by the lighthouse) and not as vulnerable to fog as Cape Ochiisi, for example (It is a long, long walk to find fog at the end). By crossing a low safety fence behind the lighthouse, it is possible to sit down

away from the wind (if it is windy) and have stable scope views. Be careful, however! I slipped and almost fell on the rocks some distance below. During my four visits there, fog arrived from the south, avoiding the Nemuro Strait side which always stayed more or less clear, the borderline between fog and clear weather moving back and forth at Nosappumisaki. Occasionally, everything appeared fine before arriving at Nosappu, which however had thick fog. In those cases, I either waited for the weather to improve or returned later.



**Fig. 8.** The Cape Nosappumisaki observation point in light fog.

Two pairs of **Red-faced Cormorants** breed on a separate cliff right of the shrine, together with more numerous **Japanese** and **Pelagic Cormorants**, and are visible to the left of the lighthouse. The closest views can be had by a crab restaurant, about 150 meters before the lighthouse, where a line of memorial stones have been erected. Several **Spectacled Guillemots** are present, together with **Pigeon Guillemots** (scarce), **Ancient Murrelets** and **Harlequin Ducks**. One may need more

than one visit to see the first two species at a close distance. **Rhinoceros Auklets** were numerous; on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 3,200 flew south in two hours, between 3.50 and 5.50 PM. The movement was increasing minute by minute, but I had to leave for **Blakiston's Owls**.

At the moment, there is but a slim chance for a fly-by **Tufted Puffin**. I failed to see any. They do not breed on the mainland anymore. Take knows a boat trip to a breeding site (one or two pairs) at one of the islands. On the other hand, in early June just about any of the sought-after small alcids may turn up. On the 8<sup>th</sup> June there was a single **Long-billed Murrelet** next to the observation point and on the 10<sup>th</sup>, a **Crested Auklet**. A week earlier, Take had seen **Whiskered Auklets** there, and the **Crested Auklet** was seen again soon after my departure.



**Fig. 9.** A **Rhinoceros Auklet** at Nosappumisaki. A free hand pocket camera digiscope shot.

About 30 **Pacific** and **Black-throated Divers** were seen and a **Glaucous-winged Gull**, once. A **Siberian Rubythroat** had its territory at the parking lot. The pretty species was a common sight in the coastal villages, with 5-10 observed daily.

A few sea mammals were also recorded: a single **Minke Whale**, **Sea Otters** and **Spotted Seals**. One of the seals caught and ate a **Rhinoceros Auklet!**

## **Lake Choboshi**

About 20 minutes drive from the Furen Lodge, the village and forest by Lake Choboshi was a great place for a nature lover, with a large variety and some very nice species to see. Passing through the village, to the right, one finds a shelter and wooden steps uphill, the start of a loop nature trail. The trail is in need of renovation and for the moment too difficult to walk around the lake early in the season, but there is a close-by marshy depression worth a visit. Walk to the top and down past a number of Shinto stone statues and you will arrive at a **Japanese Robin** territory.

The curious bird responded well to a short recording, scurrying around me and singing loudly, thereby immediately beating the now silent intruder. More robins responded from the other side of the lake. There were many forest birds around, including **Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers**, **Oriental Cuckoos** and others. I wish the trail was in a better shape and I had time to walk around the lake. That would have taken the best part of a day, with the wet conditions and worn out boardwalks, and required a pair of rubber boots.

By the steps, a freshly arrived **Gray's Grasshopper Warbler** had discovered an ideal nest site and was much agitated by my tape, staying in open view for a prolonged period. One of the numerous **Japanese Bush-Warblers** was equally bold. The site would have offered great opportunities for photography with a proper camera, while sitting comfortably on the steps.

On the east side of the village, a small lakeside marsh had a family of **Red-crowned Cranes**. A party of **Black Scoters** was seen floating by the shore. In the village, there were several male **Siberian Rubythroats**. The Lake Choboshi itself had a variety of waterfowl, including a pair of **Smew**.



**Fig. 10.** Lake Choboshi, early in the morning.



**Fig. 11.** The steps...



**Fig. 12.** The statues...



**Fig. 13.** ...and the boardwalk.

## Hattaushi Bridge

The Cow Bridge is 'the' Lake Furen site for **Blakiston's Fish Owl**, which nest in a no-access special reserve. Playing recordings is not acceptable there. According to Take, one needs on average three visits to see the owl. I did the three visits, but failed. According to the reserve warden, whom I met once, the best viewpoints are not on the bridge itself, but by the two tracks 200 meters higher up (the best place to park one's car) and uphill from there. Judging by calls, that is where the owls were. On each visit, I heard 1-3 **Blakiston's** calling, one from a neighboring territory. Once, an **Ural Owl** was calling in the east. In the evenings, the atmosphere was just great, with the owls, roding **Eurasian Woodcocks** and **Latham's Snipes**. The forest had several other good species (**Oriental Cuckoo, Scaly Thrush, Japanese Robin, Siberian Blue Robin**). I also had my only **White-throated Needletails** there, late in the evening.

Did I fail to see the **Blakiston's Fish Owl**? No! On the 9<sup>th</sup>, when returning from Nosappumisaki to Nemuro, one flew across a meadow and the road, landing by the shoreline in the late afternoon. When I mentioned this to Take, he immediately knew the site. There are several territories around Nemuro Peninsula and Hattaushi Bridge is the most reliable one. The roadsides between Nemuro and Nosappumisaki also had a few **Chestnut-cheeked Starlings** and **Long-tailed Rosefinches**. **Sika Deer** were numerous, just like almost anywhere in East Hokkaido.

## Shiretoko Pass

Also known as 'Rausu Pass' in some trip reports, this is the highest point on the road between Rausu and Cape Utorosaki on the north coast. Mt. Rausudake dominates the impressive scenery. It is a 2 hour 15 minute drive from Furen Lodge, along the Nemuro Strait shoreline to Rausu, and then steep up to the Shiretoko mountains, on a perfect tarmac highway. The Japanese are well known for their skills in road construction and this road confirms their reputation. The pass is high enough to have reliable clear weather, even if there is fog down by the sea. An early morning drive on the coastal road may have its perks: a **Japanese Robin** on the road in my case. More skulking than the European Robin, the species is far more often heard than seen.

**Japanese Accentors** (5) were present by the large parking lot on the top of the pass (and a little bit lower down). Just cross the road and have a look in the stunted brush. They also readily responded to mp3 recordings. Another local specialty, **Gray Bunting**, was much harder to locate. Take has sometimes seen a singing male from the parking lot. Brazil's guidebook has directions for a good area along a hiking trail up the mountain, but this is far away, difficult to locate and under deep snow in June. Fortunately, I was able to find a territory right by the main road about 3 km back towards Rausu (**Fig. 15**). The bunting was heard singing in dwarf bamboo by a stream and some playing of its song made the bird cross the road to more bamboo, with rather nice fly-by views.



**Fig. 14.** A **Japanese Accentor** at Shiretoko Pass; a free hand digiscope pocket camera shot.

**Buff-bellied Pipits** were found on the high grassy slopes, **Olive-backed** lower down. **Pacific Swifts** were particularly numerous at the pass. Other interesting bird species included two **Pine Grosbeaks** and two **Common Crossbills** (scarce in Japan). It was cool and clear on the partly snow-clad mountain slopes. Several Japanese nature-lovers were looking for bears from the relative safety of the road. I joined them with my scope, but we failed.





**Fig. 15.** The Gray Bunting site (notice the sign). There is a small rest area 100 downhill, on left.



**Fig. 16.** Spring colors lower down the road to Rausu.

## **Notsuke Hanto**

About half way between Furen-Ko and Rausu, a long sandy peninsula called Notsuke Hanto may be accessed by a tarmac side road. In June, there was not that much to see, except my only **Middendorff's Grasshopper Warbler** (I did not enter the Shunkunitai Reserve at Lake Furen). This used to be a regular site for **Yellow-breasted Buntings**. There are a few breeding **Redshanks** around, which I did not see. That I did not mind. **Redshank** is an abundant species on the shores of Gulf of Bothnia, Finland, where I currently live. 12 **Red-crowned Cranes**, 16 **White-tailed Eagles**, two **Glaucous-winged Gulls**, several **Chestnut-cheeked Starlings** and many **Long-tailed Rosefinches** were the most memorable records. Notsuke Hanto is definitely worth a visit in season, as both access and observation are easy.

## **Sounkyo Gorge Road**

On my way between Chitose and Kawayu, I took the fastest route via Asahikawa. Towards the end of the toll roads, a mountain 'short-cut' branches right to Sounkyo and Kitami-Shi. Along this road, the high part had some fir forest and mixed forest as well. A brief stop produced two singing **Sakhalin Leaf-Warblers**, a relatively difficult species lower down on the east coast. *Xanthodryas* **Arctic Warblers** and **Northern Hawk-Cuckoos** were also present, with their strange songs.

## **Nopporo Forest Park**

Being forced to return to Sapporo earlier than planned, I made a short afternoon visit to Nopporo Forest Park (admission 300 yen). This is a relatively crowded but well forested city park with a few trails and a good variety of (mostly) common forest species. At 3.30 PM and afterwards, almost till sunset, an incredible chorus of crickets made hearing any birds impossible. On top of that, mosquitoes (the only place I encountered them) were plentiful despite the afternoon heat. Towards sunset, the crowds suddenly disappeared, crickets went to bed, and I could finally locate 6 **Japanese Varied Tits** by their calls, the main target species.

Two **Grey Nightjars** said their farewell when I left. The reason for silence became apparent at the parking lot: the guard informed me that the park had been closed at 6 PM, despite the statement 'open 7-21' at the lower gate! Fortunately, it was possible to get out and reach the Toyota Rent-a-Car office on time. Two **Gray's Grasshopper Warblers** were singing by the airport road, being my last bird record in Hokkaido.

If you are looking for some pleasant birdwatching in a good variety of habitats in early June, East Hokkaido is a great choice. Good luck for your birdwatching in Japan!



**Fig. 17.** Pocari Sweat, one of the hot weather drinks available in Japan. I drank a lot of Sweat.

