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AMAMI OSHIMA, JAPAN, IN AUGUST 2013

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Fig. 1. An *amamii* Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker at Amami Natural Forest.

In 2013, August 8th to 10th, I had a chance to visit one of the northern islands in the Ryukyu chain, Amami Oshima, for two days. Among birdwatchers, the island is primarily known for three endemic or near-endemic species: Amami Woodcock, Amami Thrush and Lidth's Jay. On my way to Kyoto, I had noticed that the exorbitant regular rate of €1000 return from Osaka's Itami airport had been reduced by 40% to fill up the next week's flights. I grasped the moment, knowing that I had a vacant weekend, even though the €600 certainly was not cheap for such a short return journey. Japan Airlines (JAL) has a monopoly on the route and it shows in price structure.

After an Itami airport departure, the JAL flight arrived almost on time at Amami Airport at 16.50, the five minute delay being extensively apologized. I was soon collected by a First Rent-A-Car (formerly, Mazda Rent-A-Car) representative and we went to their office two minutes away. As almost always in Japan, I was a much appreciated customer. My car was upgraded to a sporty Mazda Axela GT, I got a coat hanger for jacket and they carried my suitcases all the way. Everything went smoothly, despite the fact that there was hardly any common language. The difficult parts of documentation were clarified by an English-speaking colleague on phone. In Japan, one needs an International Driver's License as a translation of one's national license. It is compulsory for car rentals. Mine had expired two years ago and there had been no time to obtain another one (expensive and slow in Finland), but as a translation it had not 'expired'.

The drive to the town of Naze, today officially Amami-Shi, started with a visit to a local supermarket, a Coop, from where high quality food and drinks were obtained. As usual in Japan, cold drinks were available 24/7 in many roadside vending machines, for around €1 per can or bottle. Nowadays, Japan is a cheap place to visit for visitors from the Euro zone.

The Mazda had a navigator. I had brought a Shobunsha Road Atlas with me and got another more accurate map from the First Rent-A-Car. They had set the navigation to take me from the office to my hotel along the shortest route. The combination of navigator and maps was very helpful, even though the first one was in Japanese. One could always see one's location on the island and the driving direction, in addition to streets and crossings in populated areas. Only in some parts of the mountains, the roads and tracks were so recent that they were neither in the navigator data nor in the two sets of maps.

Driving in Amami, and the rest of rural Japan, is an intercultural experience. Security is overemphasized and speed limits incredibly low by European standards, 40 km/h on roads deserving 80 km/h. Despite this, many locals prefer to drive even slower. Moreover, they practically never overtake, unless being forced to do so. The result is long lines of cars behind the slow ones. At night, the scarcity of traffic enabled one to drive much faster, according to speed limits.



Fig. 2. The Mazda Axela had a navigator, very helpful even though in Japanese.

The towering Amami Sun Plaza was relatively easy to find in Naze (Amami-Shi), being located along a major seaside thoroughfare, in the centre. Naze is a small, easygoing town, and as safe and organized as most towns in Japan. I had picked the room by Agoda, the Thai room reservation service in the Internet, instead of looking for the budget choices recommend by Brazil and others. ASP was high class and their Agoda room rate very competitive at €39. I was warmly welcomed to stay there, and got a peaceful room high up in the building. The people of the reception spoke fluent English and we had a number of interesting conversations on wildlife. They were extremely accommodating to my needs, which certainly were not the average among their clientele.

One detail did, however, worry me in the beginning. There was no parking lot or street parking, but an automated parking machine which lifted the cars inside the building in six ferris wheel style units which each accommodated five vehicles. Moreover, the system was operated only between 7.30 and 22.30. In practice, this was not a problem. At 19.00 I told the receptionist that I needed to leave at 1.30, and went to my room, to go to bed after a short meal and shower. Perfect pillows!

In the evening, they had taken the Mazda out at 22.30, and parked it at the access to machine, where it waited, turned around to face the street by a huge round metal plate under it. On the second night, I left early enough to take the car out normally, and arrived late in the morning, only to check out. They let me keep the room for an extra hour, to allow relaxed shower and a rest before a drive to the airport, with hours of birding on the way.

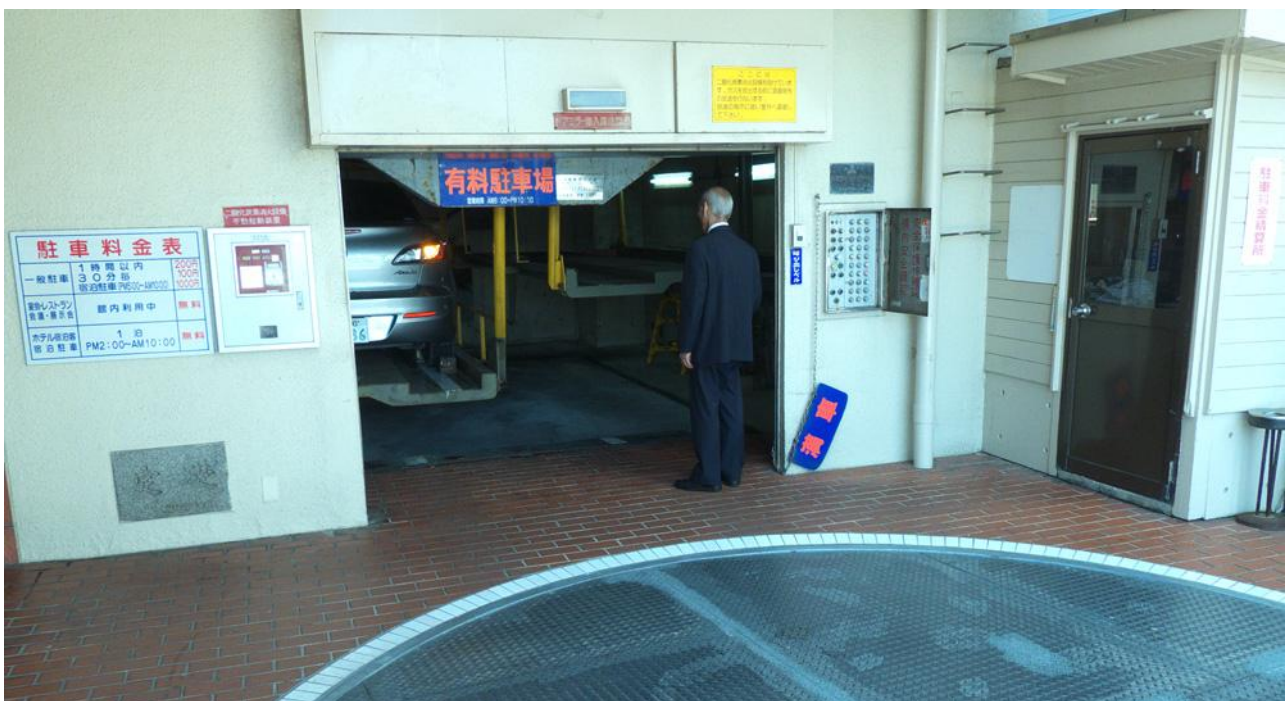


Fig. 3. The automated parking machine at Amami Sun Plaza: the Mazda on its way up.

My main target species on the island were Japanese Hawk Owl (some day perhaps Ryukyu Hawk Owl *Ninox (japonica) totogo*), Owston's Woodpecker, Amami Thrush, Ryukyu Flycatcher and Lidth's Jay. Some taxonomists still consider the first four subspecies. Amami Woodcock I had already seen in Yanbaru, Northern Okinawa, where it also occurs in small numbers, but was

looking for more, with prolonged views. Among the mammals of the island, the living fossil and ancestor of later rabbits, the Amami Black Rabbit, was a must. In addition, I tried to expand my year 2013 list, already close to 1.000 species, as much as possible, and was looking for snakes, as well. Wildlife-spotting activities therefore focused on nights and early mornings, in forests.

All in all, 45 bird species were recorded in two nights on Amami Oshima, together with three species of mammals and two species of snakes.



Fig. 4. The endemic species are highlighted in a number of tables: Amami Black Rabbit, Owston's Woodpecker, Amami Thrush, Lidth's Jay and Amami Yama-Shigi.

THE FIRST NIGHT

At 1.30, after leaving the Amami Sun Plaza, I turned left and followed the coastal highway through nine junctions with traffic lights, before arriving at the first tunnel to the west of the town. At the sixth and ninth traffic lights one needed to turn left. A twenty minute search followed, before an access to a gravel road up to mountains was discovered. The track crosses the central part of the island on high ridges and is a bit rough in places. Expect to hit a stone or two in a sedan, despite careful driving.

The access was as follows: after the tunnel, take the first narrow and straight street to right, turn right at a T-crossing at the end, and immediately right again. Follow the street up and turn right at a Y-crossing (Fig. 5), following a sign to Kinsakubaru Virgin Forest, the stakeout for Amami endemics about 11 km later. There are crossings on the way, but they are also signposted, and the track could also be found on the First Rent-A-Car map. If I remember correctly, one needs to turn right first and ignore the junctions afterwards, driving straight, until the entrance of Kinsakubaru Virgin Forest is seen on the left.



Fig. 5. Signs at the first Y-crossing of the high ridge track; right to Kinsakubaru Virgin Forest.

On the last kilometer of the road, there is a three-way junction (Fig. 6), access to Chinaze on the right (I did not notice that on the first visit; more below) and Kinsakubaru Forest and Sumiyo Dam forward.

After a short drive, there is another junction to the left, and a narrow track to the forest proper, with signs portraying the key species (Fig. 7). This may be driven by a sedan, at least to a spacious spot with a red sign (Fig. 8). Afterwards, the track gradually became rougher and a 4x4 would have been needed after the first 500 meters. It is, however, not necessary to go that far. The same applies to the main track at the junction, continuing forward and downhill, towards Sumiyo Dam (signposted).



Fig. 6. More signs at the three-way crossroads; right to Chinaze, back to Naze and forward to KVF.



Fig. 7. Access to Kinsakubaru Virgin Forest Reserve, with informative signs. Right to Sumiyo Dam.



Fig. 8. The red sign site, with parking space and plenty of leaf litter, good for Amami Thrushes.

Before dawn, I drove the main track very slowly, scanning the roadsides while driving, and listening for owls, all the four windows open. Whenever something was spotted, I stopped. At dawn, I focused on the upper part of the Chinaze access road, before returning to the Kinsakubaru Virgin Forest and spending the main part of the stay at the red sign area and about 500 m beyond

it, the turning point on the first visit. On the way back, several stops were made along the access and main tracks, with another visit to the Chinaze access road.



Fig. 9. Driving on the Kinsakubaru Virgin Forest access road, good for the first 1,5 km.

The weather was perfect and nothing like the heavy rain and winds experienced in Okinawa in 2010: clear sky, no wind and temperatures between +24 and +27 C at night. Despite the exceptional conditions to listen for owls, I would have not anticipated the plentitude of them on the high ridges. The young birds had apparently recently left their nests and were begging for food in small groups, and adult males were actively calling to defend their territories for another breeding season. All in all, I counted a conservative minimum of 65 Elegant Scops Owls, two thirds of them young birds, and five females! In addition, six *totogo* Japanese Hawk Owls. Japanese Scops Owls were not present at the high altitude (cf. the second night).

About half way on the road towards Kinsakubaru, an Amami Yama-Shigi (Amami Woodcock in Japanese) was suddenly standing in front of the car, right in the middle of the track! It was very tame and allowed photography from the car, a behavior which would later be discovered to be common for the species. Only reluctantly the woodcock took off when I had to proceed. What a great view after a single brief encounter in Okinawa...

On the other hand, the roadside forests were very dry and there consequently were only few frogs and neither snakes on the track nor Ryukyu Robins on roadside leaf litter in the morning. They were commonly singing further in the forest, mainly along streams with running water. The *komadori* nominate subspecies has been proposed to be split as a species, from the *namiyei* of Okinawa.

The handsome Japanese Wood Pigeons were also common and conspicuous at Kinsakubaru in the morning. I estimated to have seen and heard about 25 of them. The robust Ryukyu Green Pigeons

were almost equally plentiful. Ruddy Kingfishers were vocal at their territories, but none of them were seen well on the first visit.

Owston's Woodpeckers were soon spotted, a total of four individuals, with their dark plumage (more uniform than in Birds of East Asia), exceptionally long bills and Great Spotted Woodpecker style calls. The species has earlier been lumped with White-backed Woodpecker. Also the *amamii* Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers were interesting to observe, with their distinctively different plumage in comparison with subspecies further north, on the large islands of Japan. Another intriguing case is the *ogawae* Brown-eared Bulbul, seven of which were present at Kinsanubaru (more on the second visit). In the future, there may be a new understand of this polytypic species with very obvious regional differences.



Fig. 10. An Owston's Woodpecker, with its extra long bill and black lower chest.



Fig. 11. A Ryukyu Minivet, one of the common forest birds in Amami Oshima.

Ryukyu Minivets were ubiquitous in the mixed bird parties of the forest. Lidth's Jays were also common, especially along the Chinaze road, but shy and relatively difficult to observe after sunrise. At dawn, they stayed in the open, looking all black, but I had to put some effort to get good views later on.

Ryukyu Flycatchers were even more difficult. It was possible to locate two singing males, on top of the ridge and along a stream downhill towards Chinaze, but I failed to see either of them, despite considerable effort and a mp3 recording. The problem was that I could not walk close enough, due to steep terrain or a stream between me and a bird.

The star species of the forest surprised me. On the way down to the turning point, past the red sign parking space, I had flushed something brown by the track. A Brown-eared Bulbul, I thought. On the way back, I stopped at one spot, checking something by the road without leaving the car. It took a while and I suddenly saw something moving on the road, in the periphery of vision. A smart Amami Thrush was hopping on the track, inspecting leaf litter! The bird was admired for at least 15 minutes. I had not dared to expect to actually to see one, but did it anyway straight on the first attempt!



Fig. 12. What is that?! Could it be an..

The ridges around Kinsakubaru are the last stronghold of the species in Amami, and the world, according to recent surveys. There are other more fragmented populations. Officially, there are less than 30 breeding pairs left but the number could well be twice as much. The question is: How accurate is the census based on singing males?

The largest of the *Zoothera* thrushes, the *Zoothera major* has only 12 tail feathers and yellow feet and base of the lower mandible, and a song completely different from White's Thrush.



Fig. 13. ...Amami Thrush? Yes!!!

Amami Black Rabbits were not present along the route, which probably was a blessing in disguise, because I had something interesting to look for the second night. I had, after all, scored with all the target birds at once. (The Ryukyu Flycatcher was still on the 'need to see' list). A Wild Boar was encountered twice, at the middle section of the main track and again at Kinsakubaru Forest. Other species of the night and the morning were Oriental Turtle Dove, Lesser Cuckoo, Japanese Paradise Flycatcher, Large-billed Crow, Eastern Great Tit, Varied Tit and Japanese White-eye.



Fig. 14. A Varied Tit, another cute Japanese bird.

Tired but happy after the success, I missed one junction on the way back and was diverted to another coastal village two tunnels west of Naze (Amami-Shi), but that was not really a problem. I

returned to the hotel at 11.45, after shopping at a convenience store with bakery (easy parking), just before the first tunnel, and went to bed after a shower and a delicious takeaway meal, sleeping till early evening. I was not disturbed by anybody or anything during the day's sleep in the air-conditioned room. Even the curtains were thick enough to prevent sunlight entering it.

THE SECOND NIGHT, TILL LATE AFTERNOON

On the 9th of August, I left Naze (Amami-Shi) at 21.30, this time driving the coastal highway west and south, all the way to the southwest corner. The idea was to spend most of the night around Mt. Yuwan (Yuwandake in Japanese), the highest mountain on the island, and have another go at Kinsukubaru Virgin Forest at dawn. Again, the weather was just perfect, calm and clear, with temperatures ranging between +25 and +27 C, according to altitude. Later on, in the afternoon, there was slight wind and some scattered clouds, the temperature rising up to +35 degrees.

After the sixth tunnel on the highway, beyond Cape Utsusaki, I turned left and up to the highlands. In that direction, the tarmac roads were perfect and it was easy proceed. By following signs and my car rental map, and the compass of the navigator as a support, I explored the lonely roads all the way up to Mt. Yuwan, finding 7 Amami Woodcocks on the way.

In there, a steep access road with another pair of woodcocks takes one up to a parking lot, from where a trail to a viewpoint starts. This was a good spot to eat something, and use the services of a nearby toilet unit, spotlessly clean, modern and with movement-activated lights. There are many such public toilets in Amami Oshima, and they were marked on the car rental map.

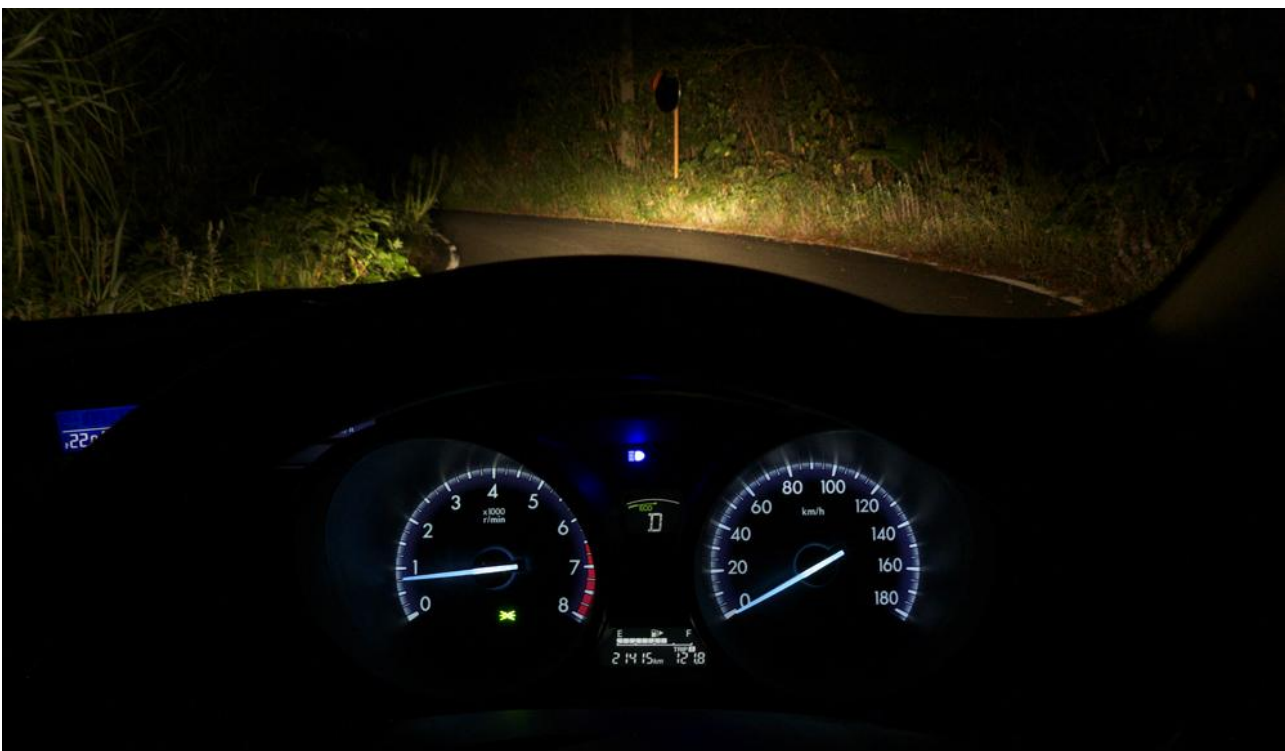


Fig. 15. Patrolling the fine roads of Mt. Yuwan region, in perfect weather.

From Mt. Yuwan, I returned towards the original direction but turned left in the first junction, and left again, if I remember correctly, following a streamside road back to the coast (see the maps). The road arrived on the coastal highway south of the seventh tunnel, about four kilometers north of Cape Sonsaki. The areas next to streams are ideal for Amami Woodcocks, and 10 more were seen in a rapid succession.

Five Amami Black Rabbits were also seen there, to my great delight! The 'living fossils' were cute with their short ears and somewhat clumsy movements, and difficult to photograph. A brownish black animal does not actually stand out in the darkness of night. A smart Ryukyu Long-tailed Giant Rat, which I had seen also in Okinawa, was spotted on the way to Mt. Yuwan, too.



Fig. 16. An Amami Black Rabbit, with its short ears and legs. Drive with caution at night!

After the successful tour in the southwest, I tried to find a road up to Kinsakubaru at Yamato-Son, mistakenly believing this to be the downhill road to the coast I had visited from the above-mentioned three-way junction. The car rental map seemed to indicate that.

As a result, I spent more than two hours on the hills and mountains of this area, until all the new roads and tracks had been tested, without success. Several of them were not on the maps, but all except one eventually looped back to the coastal highway. During the process, 3 Amami Woodcocks and 3 Amami Black Rabbits were seen, in addition to owls. Thereby, the totals of these species for the night were 22 and 8, respectively.



Fig. 17. Another 'pedestrian': Ryukyu Odd-tooth Snake crosses the road close to Yamato-Son.



Fig. 18. A typical encounter with an Amami Woodcock: first, one is spotted on the track, standing.



Fig. 19. Then, photographs are taken from a car window. The bird does not mind close proximity.



Fig. 20. Eventually, some birds thought that enough is enough and decided to show who is the boss. They started goose-stepping towards me and flicking their wings...



Fig. 21. ...or gave more subtle hints that I could stop shooting and hit the road again.

The one exception among the roads was the Sumiyo Dam track, which I managed to enter in the sedan, even though it was a bit rough and overgrown. The windows being open, I soon collected some company from the vegetation, including a few stick insects, the largest of them 20 cm long! Fortunately, they are very timid creatures. The last of the spiders collected was discovered in the afternoon at the airport, at the security check, when I suddenly felt it running on my neck and caught the insect, to the amusement of the people around me.

At one point, a depression made driving forward impossible, and I made a 500 meter reconnaissance walk to find out if the Kinsakubaru junction was close enough to warrant some road repair with stones, before proceeding. It was an exciting walk on the overgrown track, the potential presence of Habu vipers vivid in my mind. One is said to live three seconds after a bite. I do not know if that is true but my trekking stick certainly was in active use each time grass covered the ground on the track. A powerful headlight is a must in these forests at night.

Only later it dawned to me that I needed to drive all the way to Chinaze to enter the road leading to the three-way junction on the high ridge, and Kinsakubaru Virgin Forest. Fortunately, this road turned out to be fast and I arrived to my destination soon after sunrise, at 5.30, on the 10th of August. Another two-and-half hours were spent in the upper part of the KVF access road and around the red sign area of the forest. Afterwards, I drove back to Chinaze and continued back to Naze (Amami-Shi), to the Amami Sun Plaza hotel.

Many of the same bird species were recorded at Kinsakubaru as on the previous morning. This time, I spotted at least 10 Ruddy Kingfishers, one of them seen very well, 6 *amamii* Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers, 3 Owston's Woodpeckers, about 10 Lidth's Jays and about the same number of Ryukyu Robins as on the 9th. No new species were added on the trip list, however.

Did I see the Ryukyu Flycatcher? Yes, while waiting for the Amami Thrush to reappear, hiding in the car by the red sign. A juvenile bird with a spotted breast arrived on a branch right next to me, to be photographed and videoed! What is more, I saw two Amami Thrushes at Kinsakubaru. The first one was on the main track, 100 meters before the forest reserve access, and the second one at the site of previous day's record, both them inspecting leaf litter for food. To me, the first and third birds looked, in photos, like two different individuals, despite the same site. I may be wrong...



Fig. 22. A juvenile Ryukyu Flycatcher at Kinsakubaru Virgin Forest.

In regard to owls, the areas visited in the second night had less young Elegant Scops Owls but a better variety of owl species. The Elegant Scops Owls occurred from the high ridges to almost to the sea level, with about 25 adults (almost all males) and 10 young ones recorded. Lower down, they coexisted with 5 calling Japanese Scops Owls. *Totogo* Japanese Hawk Owls, 4 of them, were only recorded around the access to Sumiyo Dam track (the SD track passes the dam in the west). Altogether, 115 owls on the two trips!

Five snakes were encountered during the night. First, an Amami Odd-scaled Snake crossed the coastal highway. Then, two Ryukyu Odd-tooth Snakes were observed northwest of Mt. Yuwan (streamside track) and another two on the way up and down the area where I tried to find the way to Kinsakubaru, east of Yamato-Son. No sharp photos, however, because of technical problems and their speed of crossing the tracks.

In my Okinawa 2010 report, I did call the latter species Habu by mistake, but have learned the identification criteria later. Mistakes are sometimes made in trip reports, which are often written in a hurry and cannot be polished forever. There is a pressure to deliver them as fast as possible, to help others planning to visit the same destination.

After a rest at the hotel, I drove northeast to Tatsugo and turned left, taking another left turn about one kilometer after the village, signposted to Amami Natural Forest, a park-like establishment for nature observations. On top of the hill, another turn to the right followed at a four-way (or was it a T?) junction, the rest being a drive forward. I left my car at the parking lot and walked to the boardwalks and trails on the opposite side of the road, in the stifling midday heat. Not much was seen in the park at the worst time of the day. The best bird was another juvenile Ryukyu Flycatcher. *Amamii* Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers were also there, together with a few Lidth's Jays.

I met, however, a Japanese bird-photographer, whom I had also briefly seen on the Kinsakubaru road early in the morning, and we had a chat over photos and bird taxonomy. He showed a shot of an Amami Thrush which had been taken at Amami Natural Forest the previous day. Between us, we made four sight records of three to four individuals in two days. Not bad for early August...

In the end, I run out of time having underestimated the distance to the airport and the time needed for shopping Japanese food for Finland at the Coop on the way there. I also needed to change into a more business style attire before returning the car, after having its tank filled. The extensive driving hours cost a total of 5.700 yens in petrol, about €44.

Nevertheless, the time allowed a few stops on the road (Great Egrets, Turnstone, Rock Pigeon, Barn Swallow close to airport) and short visits at the viewpoint of Cape Aymara and the Ose Bay (Ose Kaigan) tidal flats just north of the airport, known for a good variety of shorebirds in season.

Cape Aymara was a scenic site with a commanding view over the sea, which was remarkably empty, without any Streaked Shearwaters which I had been hoping to see there (wrong season). Given time, it would be best to visit the viewpoint early in the morning and late in the afternoon. It

looked like a site with potential. The brief visit produced two Swift and two Black-naped Terns, Pacific Swallows and Red-bellied Rock Thrushes. Interestingly, a pair of Chinese Bulbuls was also present. The species must have started to colonize Amami Oshima from Okinawa, where it is already widespread.



Fig. 23. The Cape Aymara view points; one on the top and another lower down.

The Ose Bay, on the other hand, lived up to its reputation despite the season. A short look revealed the following shorebirds: Black-winged Stilt 1, Marsh Sandpiper 1 in winter plumage, Common Greenshank 3, Common Redshank 1, Wood Sandpiper 2, Pacific Golden Plover 3 in breeding plumage, Little Ringed Plover 6, Common Ringed Plover 2, Sanderling 1, Long-toed Stint 1, Red-necked Stint 7 and Sharp-tailed Sandpiper 1. There were more stints and small plovers too far away to be identified, and two Little Egrets.

The staff at First Rent-A-Car had apparently made a bet among themselves on the pronunciation of my name, and asked about it when I returned the Mazda. After response, one of them was celebrating a victory.

It was a joyful farewell, them bowing in a line along the access road, smiling and waving, and me doing the same in the car, when we left for the nearby Amami Airport, where equally welcoming JAL staff waited at the departure hall. A flight to Itami Airport, Osaka, followed, with a night at a Kansai Airport lounge, also Osaka, and an early morning direct flight to Helsinki, with Finnair.

For some reason, I got a free ride ticket for the 90 minute Kansai shuttle, another nice surprise in Japan!

CONCLUSIONS

From the economical point of view, the best choice probably is to combine a visit to Amami Oshima to visiting Okinawa. I have done them separately, for a considerable cost. On the other hand, if one is on a round-the-world trip with an alliance ticket, the flights to these islands may become very affordable indeed, especially in the case of Okinawa, with its many connections. For me, Japan has apparently become a place to visit briefly, mainly in connection with transits to other destinations in the Eastern Pacific.

After the brief experience of Amami Oshima, I would prefer the Chinaze access route to visit the Kinsakubaru Virgin Forest, instead of the rough high ridge track (named Supo Rindo?). Some exploration of alternative roads on the hills is bound to add species on one's list, but the other main site on one's itinerary should be the forest tarmac roads north of Mt. Yuwan. By doing this, one may save time and see more birds and mammals, in comfortable conditions.

August may clearly be recommended for searching for the enigmatic Amami Thrush, and other Amami endemics. Even though the thrushes do not sing, at least not as actively as in early spring, the young birds are there, more numerous than during the rest of the year (cf. mortality) and also possibly less wary than the adults. The other special birds are relatively easy to spot, including the Amami Woodcock. The 22 Amami Yama-Shigis on the second night felt like a rather large total, after reading about guided tours with around 10 birds, at maximum.

Perhaps there has been more traffic around Mt. Yuwan earlier. In August 2013, the road was cut north of Uken, for roadworks, and there was no thorough traffic. I was there alone, with the many Amami Woodcocks, five Amami Black Rabbits, the Ryukyu Long-tailed Giant Rat and Ryukyu Odd-tooth Snakes, and still feel cheerful when memorizing that wonderful night!



Fig.24. Spider nets disappear in the gloom of the forest and the spiders appear to hang in the air.