

# Japan – birding on business trip

## December 2012

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Traditional buildings with Black-eared Kites – hardly visible - flying over

Japan is a popular destination for birding trips. Often the winter birds of the northern island Hokkaido are the target, the cranes on the southern island of Kyushu, endemic species on small islands off the Japanese mainland or pelagic species to be seen from the ferry between Honshu and Hokkaido.

Instead of such highlights, this report focuses on occasional birding on business trips, in the hope to be helpful for other birders in a similar situation. Having travelled to Japan regularly during the last 12 years, I have usually visited industrial customers in the densely populated coastal part of the main island Honshu between the regions of Tokyo and Osaka. In most cases, the time for birding and sightseeing is on the afternoon of the arrival day, close to my business hotel.

Getting around by train is easy and safe. On many lines, station names are written in English. On some few lines, you need to look up the Japanese writing of your destination. Taking a bus is trickier, as you may need confirmation which bus to take and where to get off, and not always there are English speaking people around.

I will first describe my latest trip to Biwako (lake Biwa) in December 2012 and then briefly list other examples of the more worth-while short trips I made before.

## Biwako, December 6 2012

Having some free time during the light hours of the day, I took a train from Nagoya. After change at Maibara, I got off at the small Kawake station where I rented a bicycle. Sunny (but windy) weather made the view of orange trees in front of snow-covered mountain peaks quite enjoyable. I headed for the birding center at lake Biwa. On my trajectory, I stopped every now and then to look at common Japanese birds such as Black-eared Kite, Japanese Wagtail, Brown-eared Bulbul, Bull-headed Shrike and many others. Visiting a birding center offers the great advantage of using the scopes available there – I usually don't bring mine on business trips. Also the support from local birders in the center is much appreciated.



Biwako, northern part

After paying the small entrance fee and entering the center, I was directly shown to the rear side where several scopes were directed on an adult Steller's Sea Eagle in the old trees of the hillside nearby. I was surprised that it was possible to see this species so far south, but apparently it's a regular winterer here.

On the front/lake side of the station, much more nice birds could be enjoyed. A large flock of Bean Geese *middendorffii* was roosting and foraging at close range. The bill length looked like in European taiga geese. However, most bills had a lot of black and thus only narrow orange in the middle. Numerous ducks and grebes were around. After a long search, using one of the few scopes with zoom ocular, I finally saw one male Baikal Teal. Dunlins were flying around between rocks and concrete blocks

in the water. Quite a few raptors were following the lake shore on their daily patrols, including Osprey, Eastern Buzzard and Northern Goshawk.

After some more extended looks at the Sea Eagles I went to the little harbor one kilometer further up north, where I found some other wintering species, such as Smew, Goldeneye, Common Sandpiper, and Grey Wagtail. Cycling along the lake shore and then back to the station gave more good views of the local raptors. I didn't watch my time properly and therefore had to wait for almost one hour for my train. I decided to go to a wooded hill just to the east of the station. Close to a cemetery I found a group of some 20 Rustic Buntings and between them a Yellow-breasted Bunting.

## **Birding experience from other trips and locations**

If you are in the Tokyo area, a lot of information is available in literature and on websites, see below.

### **Choshi coast**

On arrival at Tokyo Narita airport in March 2003, instead of going directly to my final destination, I left my luggage at the airport and took a local train to Choshi. Information is available at the railway counter in the arrival hall of the airport. I decided to go to the Inubosaki lighthouse. Choshi is a very good place for gulls. I heavily regretted not having better prepared the identification of immature gulls, but there were sufficiently many birds possible to identify even for a complete beginner. After a while the pattern of which immature plumage belongs to which species became a bit clearer. Among the gull species I could identify here were Glaucous, Vega, Slaty-backed and Black-tailed Gull.

Other nice birds here include Pelagic and Japanese Cormorant, Eastern Reef Egret and Blue Rock Thrush. According to Mark Brazil, even Rock Sandpiper is possible in Choshi harbor.

### **Atsugi**

Just southwest of Tokyo. Like in most cities, there is a river nearby with gravel banks and park-like vegetation on the shores. This is the environment I'm looking for when birding close to my business hotel. During two visits in February and May 2003, I saw Long-billed plovers, Zitting Cisticola looking strikingly different from European birds, House Swift, Daurian Redstart, Azure Magpie and Little Tern.

### **Toyota-shi**

Just to the east of Nagoya. Also here a good thing to do is going to the river and strolling along its banks. In March 2001, I saw Japanese Grosbeak, Japanese Pigmy Woodpecker, Pale Thrush, Black-faced bunting and many more species. In May the same year, I saw some bitterns, Yellow or Schrenck's, flying around at dusk. Next time I visit this town I will try to go to Maeda Koen close to Hiratobashi station. This place seems to be even more worth-while.

### **Nagoya**

In the city you can see Broad-billed crows. The smallest parks can hold Brown-eared Bulbul, Oriental Turtle-Dove, Japanese Whiteeye, and Dusky Thrush (in winter).

In February 2007 I went to Makinogaike, a nice park in Nagoya. To get there from Nagoya Station, take the Higashiyama Subway line to Hoshigaoka. Take the city bus (Kan Hoshigaoka) #1, getting off at

Umemoisaka. It is recommended to ask if you are entering the correct bus. This trip resulted in observations of White's Thrush, Smews, and a Red-flaked Bluetail.

Nagoya is situated at a bay including several river mouths. The best estuary for wader watching is at Fujimae-higata. Here you have another birding center with extremely friendly staff who showed me all the present birds (during my visit in August 2010 mostly Terek sandpipers). Ospreys show up in significant numbers. Another visit in April 2013 produced Varied Tit, Mongolian Plover, Great Knot, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and an adult Saunder's Gull. It was late in the season for this winter visitor. In winter, the area is also good for ducks.

Morning is the best time for watching from east side, where the observatory is situated. It's possible but time-consuming to cross the river and watch close to the sewage plant on the other side. Birding is also very dependent on the tide. Low tide is essential for seeing waders. This is a place I will sure return to.

To get to the bird observatory, walk north, and then west across river from Noseki station (Aonami line from Nagoya station).

### Others

Even the rear side of the Tobu Narita airport hotel is worth a check. I made use of some morning hour before my plane left for Europe, and enjoyed views of Japanese Pigmy Woodpecker and Chinese Bamboo Partridge.

In January 2005 I spent half an hour time in the harbour of Tsuchiwa, which resulted in seeing a Red-throated Thrush.

Agricultural land can be disappointing at times. In most regions, you can easily find Grey-headed Lapwing. An August walk near Mikawa-Anjo resulted in Intermediate Egret, finally seeing well the bill base and comparing it to Great Egret. Near Kariya I saw Oriental Reed Warbler in the narrow reed belt of a small canal.

### Species list Biwako December 6, 2012

1. Taiga Bean Goose - <i>Anser fabalis middendorffii</i>	Sädgås	160
2. Eurasian Wigeon - <i>Anas penelope</i>	Bläsand	4
3. Gadwall - <i>Anas strepera</i>	Snatterand	1
4. Baikal Teal - <i>Anas formosa</i>	Gulkindad kricka	1
5. Mallard - <i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>	Gräsand	150
6. Eastern Spot-billed Duck - <i>Anas zonorhyncha</i>	Östlig fläcknäbband	50
7. Northern Pintail - <i>Anas acuta</i>	Stjärtand	7
8. Common Pochard - <i>Aythya ferina</i>	Brunand	150
9. Tufted Duck - <i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Vigg	5

10. Common Goldeneye - <i>Bucephala clangula</i>	Knipa	1
One male flying by at the harbor.		
11. Smew - <i>Mergellus albellus</i>	Salskrake	1
12. Goosander - <i>Mergus merganser</i>	Storskrake	3
13. Little Grebe - <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis poggei</i>	Smådopping	2
The light iris of this subspecies results in a quite different impression compared to European birds		
14. Great Crested Grebe - <i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	Skäggdopping	12
15. Black-necked Grebe - <i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>	Svarthalsad dopping	1
16. Great Cormorant - <i>Phalacrocorax carbo hanedae</i>	Storskarv	50
17. Western Great Egret - <i>Ardea alba</i>	Ägretthäger	1
18. Grey Heron - <i>Ardea cinerea jouyi</i>	Gråhäger	1
19. Black-eared Kite - <i>Milvus lineatus</i>	Brun glada	18
A common and easily approachable raptor. At close range, pattern looks very different from migrans		
20. Steller's Sea Eagle - <i>Haliaeetus pelagicus</i>	Jättehavsörn	1 adult
Seen nicely in the scope about two kilometers away. Also on closer distance when cycling back to the station, but with ordinary binoculars only two spots discernible against the brown forest background: The plastic yellow bill and the white shoulder.		
21. Northern Goshawk - <i>Accipiter gentilis fujiyamae</i>	Duvhök	3
Adults, especially males have a very striking, almost black-and-white head pattern.		
22. Eastern Buzzard - <i>Buteo (buteo) japonicus</i>	Ormvråk	1
Smaller and differently patterned compared to European buzzards of the light morph.		
23. Osprey - <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	Fiskgjuse	1
24. Eurasian Coot - <i>Fulica atra</i>	Sothöna	5
25. Dunlin - <i>Calidris alpina</i>	Kärrensäppa	30
Foraging on rocks and concrete piers		
26. Common Sandpiper - <i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	Drillsnäppa	1
27. Black-headed Gull - <i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>	Skrattmås	1
28. Common Gull - <i>Larus canus</i>	Fiskmås	1
29. Oriental Turtle-Dove - <i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>	Större turturduva	4
30. Siberian Buff-bellied Pipit - <i>Anthus rubescens japonicus</i>	Hedpiplärka	1
31. Grey Wagtail - <i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	Forsärla	1
32. Black-backed Wagtail - <i>Motacilla alba lugens</i>	Sädesärla	1
33. Japanese Wagtail - <i>Motacilla grandis</i>	Japansk ärla	1
The typical buzzing call makes distinction from Black-backed easy		

34. Brown-eared Bulbul - <i>Hypsipetes amaurotis</i>	Japansk bulbyl	1
35. Eastern Great Tit/Japanese Tit - <i>Parus (major) minor</i>	Japansk (?) Talgoxe	2
36. Bull-headed Shrike - <i>Lanius bucephalus bucephalus</i>	Rosthuvad törnskata	1
Commonly found even in (sub-) urban environment. This individual was hunting just outside the window of the bird observatory		
37. Carrion Crow - <i>Corvus corone orientalis</i>	Svartkråka	2
38. Large-billed Crow - <i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	Djungelkråka	1
Easily distinguished from Carrion Crow by their typical call		
39. White-cheeked Starling - <i>Spodiopsar cineraceus</i>	Gråstare	4
40. Eurasian Tree Sparrow - <i>Passer montanus</i>	Pilfink	50
41. Grey-capped Greenfinch - <i>Carduelis sinica</i>	Orientgrönfink	100
42. Rustic Bunting - <i>Emberiza rustica</i>	Videsparv	20
43. Yellow-breasted Bunting - <i>Emberiza aureola</i>	Gyllensparv	1
A somewhat surprising encounter. Typical head and mantle pattern seen.		

### Some Useful websites

[http://www.biwa.ne.jp/~nio/eng/index\\_e.html](http://www.biwa.ne.jp/~nio/eng/index_e.html)

Containing the info I used for preparing my trip to Biwako.

<http://observation.org/index.php>

Site for worldwide biological observations. Comparable to artportalen/svalan. Currently most frequently used by Dutch and Belgian birders, but more and more by others. Click on Geography-Asia by country and then on Japan. Go to Observations – Birds to see the latest observations. You can also filter for some species or location that interests you. The start page offers a menu for trip preparation which will show all observations within a certain distance from your chosen destination

<http://www.japanbirdwatching.com/>

<http://www.ybird.jp/english/>

<http://www003.upp.so-net.ne.jp/ornitho/> (guide to birdwatching in Japan)

<http://www.jorudan.co.jp/english/norikae/e-norikeyin.html> To find train connections.

### Literature

Mark Brazil, A Birdwatcher's Guide to Japan, Kodansha International 1987. Slightly outdated, but still containing lots of useful information

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