



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 1/2014

MIYAKE JIMA, IZU ISLANDS, IN JUNE 2014

Petri Hottola (phottola@gmail.com)

Between the 24rd and 25th of June, 2014, I had a pleasure to visit the volcano island of Miyake Jima, one of the larger islands in the Izu Islands chain, south of Tokyo in the Pacific Ocean. The following report will be delivered in order to help others to do the same, with up-to-date information of the current situation, from the subjective viewpoint of a solo European visitor with no capacity to speak or read Japanese. The notes on travel practicalities may appear to be too detailed for some readers, but I myself consider them potentially more helpful than a simple statement 'I took an Airport Limousine Bus to Takeshiba Pier and the night ferry to Miyake Jima' would be.

There is comprehensive information for a visitor at the Wild Watch Japan site (www.wildwatchjapan.com), but certain features have also changed recently. All in all, everything went smoothly, despite the inevitable risks concerning the weather and limited transportation choices between the island and Tokyo.



Fig. 1. Tokai Kisen ferry, Salvia Maru, approaches Ako Pier in Miyakejima, before a departure to Tokyo.

Miyake Jima is a volcano island. In the Internet, the island has gained reputation as the 'Gas Mask Island', with a number of images portraying the islanders with their masks on, for example at a local wedding party. In fact, until recently there was a requirement to purchase a personal evacuation mask on arrival, just in case the volcano emitted poisonous gases during one's visit. The regulation was lifted on the 1st of July 2013, after a prolonged period without incidents. At the moment, Miyake Jima is safe to visit as long as one does not enter the high slopes of the volcano (access restricted). During my short visit there, some cloud-like emissions were noted above the crater, but otherwise everything remained calm.

It nevertheless probably is best to visit Miyake Jima during the next few years, rather than in 2020, for example. The volcano has a habit of erupting every 20 years and the most recent eruption was in 2000. The islanders themselves remain stoic about this feature of their ancestral home grounds. Yes, one has to evacuate to Tokyo perhaps four times during one's lifetime and stay there for half-a-year each time, until the worst is over. Nevertheless, then it is time to return, evaluate the damages, keep a gas mask at hand and start regular life once again, on the small paradise island in the middle of rich fishing grounds.

For a birder, there are good reasons to visit Miyake Jima. The island is also known as the 'Bird Island' of the Izu chain. The endemic **Izu Thrushes** and **Ijima's Warblers** are common and easy to see there, together with **Pleske's Warblers** and **Owston's Tits**, and several interesting island subspecies such as the *tanensis* **Japanese Robins**.

Also seawatching may be productive with species otherwise difficult to locate. **Japanese Murrelets** breed close by, on Sanbondake, and the sea is oftentimes full of **Streaked Shearwaters**, with a realistic chance to score with exciting other seabird species, depending on weather and season. The seabirds (and mammals) may be observed both at various Miyake Jima headlands, and on the way to and from the island, on Tokai Kisen ferries. For a field guide, I would recommend Mark Brazil's Birds of East Asia.

There are various ways to write the Japanese names of geographical features. For this report, I have decided to separate the generic substantives from the actual names. Therefore, Miyake Jima instead of Miyakejima (Jima = island, misaki = headland, ike = small lake).

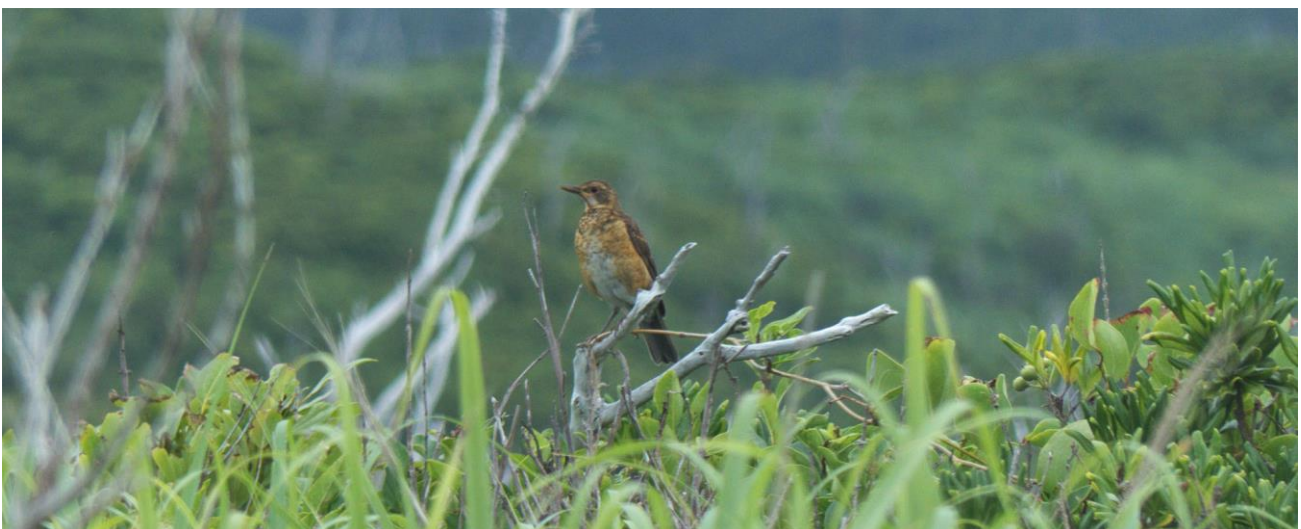


Fig. 2. A juvenile **Izu Thrush**, not portrayed in regular guidebooks, at Toga Misaki.

TRANSITING BETWEEN NARITA AND MIYAKE JIMA

In summer 2014, JAL had discontinued its flights to Miyake Jima. At the moment, 'New Central Airline' may fly there, from the Chofu airport, west of central Tokyo. The flights are, however, expensive and apparently frequently cancelled. Moreover, if a flight is chosen, one will miss the seabirds. There are helicopter services between the islands, too, but they are even more expensive. The best and most reliable choice therefore remains the Tokai Kisen ferries, with daily 22.20 departures at Takeshiba Pier ferry terminal in Tokyo (see Google Maps for location and the Internet for current timetables), and return departures are around 13.15, at Ako Port ferry terminal, in Miyake Jima.

The voyage takes seven hours to complete. In June 2014, a second class one-way ticket cost yen 7.390, €54 (yen 14.780 return; return tickets were readily available at Takeshiba ticket office). Very occasionally, difficult weather conditions, such as a typhoon or otherwise too rough seas, may lead to a cancellation. For an international visitor, it is therefore best to create a buffer of a day or two between the ferry ride and one's airport departure in Tokyo. Also, check the weather forecast. Around Tokyo, there are several interesting species to look for during the extra time, such as the **Marsh Grassbirds** and **Ochre-rumped Buntings** of Sasagawa, Chiba prefecture, if everything goes well.

Personally, I arrived in Narita at 8.40 on the 23th of June, and occupied my reserved yen 4.600 (€33) day room (spacious, well-equipped and peaceful) at the Narita Airport Rest House. The hotel with day rates between 9.00 and 17.00 is located at the airport and has a five minute courtesy shuttle which collects customers at bus stop 32, Terminal 2. It was a relief to have a shower and sleep there after a 9+ hour Finnair night flight from Helsinki, across Siberia. After a check out at 16.00, the shuttle carried me back to the airport, for an Airport Limousine Bus to Hotel Intercontinental Bay Area, next to Takeshiba ferry terminal. The ticket was yen 3.100 (€23) one way. Check their timetables in the Internet, under Narita International Airport.

For the bus, I had already purchased my ticket on arrival. It is possible, even though unlikely, that the seats will be sold out in the afternoon, and there are only few daily connections on this particular line. The last one leaves Narita International Airport at 17.15 (bus stop 7, at Terminal 2) and may take up to two hours to reach its destination, depending on traffic. The other option is the train, fast and convenient as soon as all the details and timetables have been sorted out (more below). For comfort, the bus nevertheless beats the trains. There is a guaranteed seat and one does not need to look after the bags.

Walking from the Intercontinental Bay Area, my bus stop, I arrived at the back of the Takeshiba ferry terminal. In there, it took me some time to find out the access to right area on the other side, through narrow ground floor corridors. In the spacious waiting lounge, many vending machines with food and cold drinks (normally, around yen 120-160) were discovered, together with a small restaurant. The ticket sales and luggage office were opened later, at 20.00.

The waiting time was used to make a reservation for the ferry and to familiarize oneself with the access to the Takeshiba train station, next door, outside and one level above the ferry station. The return would be late in the evening and I needed to be well prepared for a transit in order to reach the right trains to Narita City on time. Especially in the beginning of the route, the available transit times were going to be very short. There are no Airport Limousine Buses to Narita at the time of the ferry's arrival.



Fig. 3. Airport Limousine buses collect customers at bus stop 7, Terminal 2, Narita International Airport.

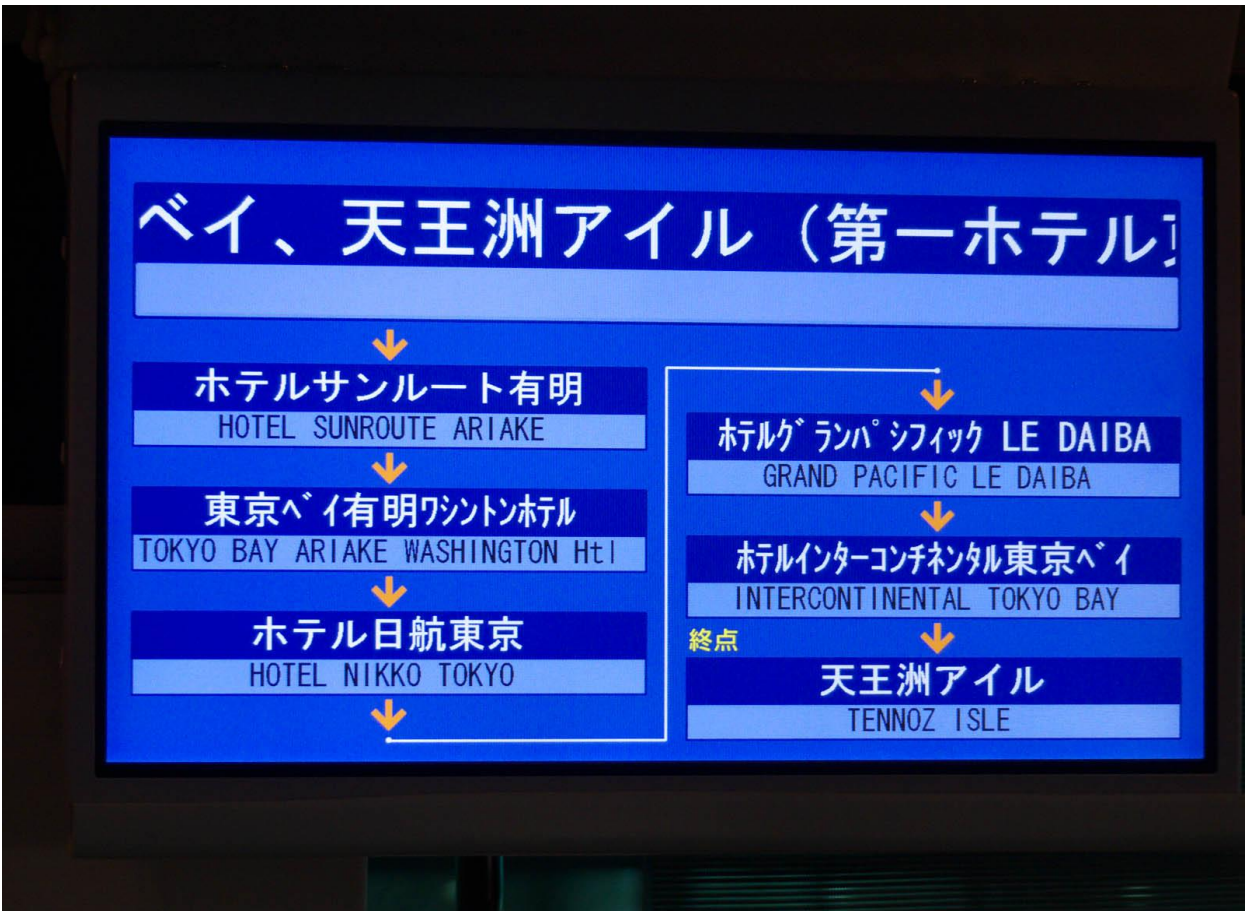


Fig. 4. On board, the next stops were shown and announced as the journey advanced.



Fig. 5 Takeshiba ferry terminal; the waiting area two-and-half hours before departure.

Eventually, more people started to gather in. I paid and collected my return tickets. In retrospect, the suitcase should not have been checked in at the luggage office, for an extra fee of yen 500 (€3.70), but carried in as a second piece of hand luggage. That is what the majority of the locals did, and the staff did not mind. On arrival at Ako, Miyake Jima, it took a while to wait for the suitcase, and it initially was unclear where to do so. The right location was a shed some distance away from the pier and the ferry terminal.

On the ferry, the second class was better than expected, with a full row of comfortable reclining seats only for me, and a chance to lie there and catch some sleep. In fact, we each had about 15 seats for ourselves and the arm rests could be turned away. An elderly gentleman showed how to make things cosy, correctly identifying a first-timer foreigner. In Japan, there always seems to be a kind person ready to help you. Clean blankets were rented for a small fee (recommended). The toilets were discovered on the next floor upstairs, together with a number of hot food, ice cream, snack and drink vending machines. There is no need to bring any food or drinks for the voyage, as long as one has enough cash. The prices were not inflated and the reception readily changed coins for me.

Back in Tokyo, I hurried upstairs to the Takeshiba train station, which unfortunately had no escalator between the station (ticket machines, also in English) and the train, which arrived another level higher up, at level three. Fortunately, a young lady came to my rescue and carried one of the bags upstairs. I was consequently able to catch a connection 10 minutes earlier than planned. A short ride to Yurikamome Line metro station at Shinbashi followed.

In there I made a mistake of hurrying through a transit gate without validating the entrance with my ticket. An alarm went off. The initially stern guard came to my rescue as soon as he saw that I actually had a proper ticket and heard that this was my first time in a Tokyo metro. He guided me down the huge station and showed the right way to the Keiseinarita line platform.

At the correct spot, another English speaking Japanese gentleman, a IT professional on his way to home at 21.30, was met, and he acted as my guide all the way to Sakura Station, one stop before Keiseinarita. We had an interesting chat on the way. He planned to arrive at home at 22.45, with a wake up at 6.00 the next morning. In the weekends, the family had quality time together, by sleeping long hours to compensate the lack of rest during the workdays.

Without these and other helpful hosts, locating the right level and the right metro to Narita City would have been a challenge at Shinbashi in the shortish 24 minute transit time. The route and timetable information at Google Maps proved to be accurate and helped to plan the late evening transit through Metropolitan Tokyo. At the end of the day, I nevertheless relied on communicating with the people. At Keiseinarita it was my turn to help an American on his way to the airport. Confused by the two Naritas, the city and the airport, he was about to step off one stop too early.

A walk to Narita U-City Hotel, beyond the main JR Narita railway station, followed at 22.33. After Shinbashi, the train had remained the same, even though it had first been labeled as a metro connection, and then two other train connections, according to the timetable. For most of the ride, each and every seat was occupied, late in the evening.

All in all, it took me 2 hours and 40 minutes to travel between the Takeshiba Ferry Terminal and Narita U-City Hotel, through Tokyo, walking time included. A taxi would not have been faster and would have cost a fortune, to say the least.



Fig. 6. The empty rows of second class reclining seats on board of Salvia Maru. Bring a wire lock to attach your luggage somewhere, even though theft is highly unlikely. On the return voyage, I left my luggage upstairs, locking it to some structures to prevent movement.

MIYAKE JIMA: ACCOMMODATION AND TRANSPORTATION

In Miyake Jima, there are several minshukus which are suitable for visiting birders. The top choice probably is Snapper Inn in Minowa, the northeastern top corner of the island, along a loop road which runs parallel with the main coastal road 212 (check their site in the Internet with Google Translate). In June 2014, they charged yen 4.500 (€33) for a room, yen 6.000 for (€44, €29 per day) one-and-half day's car rental and yen 1.500 (€11) for a three course dinner. Breakfasts (yen 900, €6.60) were also available, on request.

Noda, a well-known professional diver with international experience, replied my emails promptly and informatively. On site, his English proved to be adequate for basic communication in regard to various arrangements. My room (tatami) was on the second floor, which also had shared toilets and wash basins. The showers were in another building, across the yard. The meals were served downstairs, on low Japanese tables. The rest of the minshuku was full of students, but as we were in Japan, there was no disturbance in the evenings.



Fig. 7. My Suzuki Wagon R at Izu Misaki lighthouse, by a public toilet.

On arrival, Noda was waiting for me and two other customers at 5.15, at the Ako Port ferry terminal. After the car was loaded full of luggage (about 30 bags for the student group), we drove to Minowa, next to Kamitsuki. At sunrise, the roadsides were teeming with birds, mostly **Izu Thrushes**. Therefore at Snapper

Inn, after helping with the bags, I made a request for car keys, lifted my luggage in and left at once for birding at 5.45, explaining that this was the best time for them. We could sort out the details later.

Snapper Inn rents cars and I got a cube-style Suzuki Wagon R, a hugely popular car in Japan. The small vehicle was surprisingly spacious (no problem to fit in, I am 1.86) and ideal for the 30 km/h island roads, despite its tiny tires. The roads of Miyake Jima were in perfect condition, just like in most regions of Japan. The maps (available on the ferry and in the Internet) proved to be quite sufficient. Access roads to the key points were also signposted in English and all of them had tidy public toilets.

With the limited kilometers, it was sufficient to fill the tank only in the end, when Noda gave me a lift to the ferry terminal. The car had consumed a total of 12.75 liters, for yen 200 per liter (total cost €18.60). All in all, I had driven almost 200 km on the island, being busy with repeated visits at the best sites, at different times of the day. Along the coastal road 212, which circles the island, groceries were readily available, the best little supermarket being located right next to the western end of the Minowa loop road (at Tosa, S of Akonzaki headland). The selection included take away lunches and a good variety of snacks, fruit and drinks.

LAND BIRDS

It took me only 2 hours and 45 minutes to locate all the key target species. One may consequently conclude that one and half days is more than sufficient for Miyake Jima, and provides ample opportunities not only for prolonged studies but for periods of seabird observations, too, even if the weather was rainy. On the 24th and 25th of June, it was sunny or overcast, hot and calm for the most of the time, with a single light rain shower on the second day.

In fact, one could see the endemics between the ferry arrival at 5.00 and its departure back to Tokyo at 13.00, but that would be a bit stressful after the night ferry and with approximately seven hours of birding ahead. Nevertheless, it is an option to be considered if a typhoon is approaching the next day.

In regard to land birds, two habitats rule on the island of Miyake: the lush scrub of the coast and the prime deciduous forests higher up on mid-altitude slopes. For the scrub, Izu Misaki and Toga Misaki were excellent. Be sure to check the old coastal loop road, too, when visiting the latter. In regard to the forest habitats, the well-known lakeshore forest of Tairo Ike has everything one may be looking for. At the time of my visit, road maintenance work disturbed bird observations at times, but only during the slow mid-day hours. Mosquitoes were also periodically a problem at Tairo Ike, at the lakeside end of the road, but for some reason not in the morning. In the early mornings, I was the only human being there.

Personally, I preferred to visit the same locations repeatedly, once the productive ones were identified, rather than prospecting for alternative locations such as Yakushi Do temple. The chosen tactic provided deeper understanding of the sites and tended to lead to improved performance after the initial visit. There always was something new to see at each site, and especially at Tairo Ike.



Fig. 8. Tairo Ike has some beautiful forest and good numbers of forest birds.



Fig. 9. A lakeshore information table at Tairo Ike. The access road runs on the opposite side, in the forest.



Fig. 10. A male **Izu Thrush**, the iconic symbol of Miyakejima, declared as a 'national monument' in Japan.



Fig. 11. A **Japanese Wood Pigeon**, wary and well camouflaged in a fruiting tree at Tairo Ike.

For a Miyake Jima bird list, see the Wild Bird Society Japan website at www.wbsj.org/en/miyake. The following list includes the 26 land bird species recorded in my birdwatching diary.

Chinese Bamboo-Partridge: A beautiful pair was walking on the Minowa loop road (100 west of Snapper) in the first morning. I followed them by car, careful to not to disturb the birds. Another male was calling close by, on both days. The minshuku surroundings seem to be the best area for this attractive introduced species.

Japanese Hawk Owl: A single bird was calling at Snapper Inn on the 24th of June. Others have observed them in the same area.

Japanese Wood Pigeon: Common at fruiting trees especially at Tairo Ike. Up to 40 individuals were seen in a relatively small area there. One needs to approach with care to be able to observe these somewhat shy but handsome pigeons. At first it looks that there is but a single bird in the canopy. One more step, and you have accidentally flushed 10, and need to wait for their return.

Oriental Turtle Dove (*orientalis*): Relatively common roadside species throughout. The Nansei Shoto subspecies *stimpsoni* is not supposed to occur north of Amami Oshima.

Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker (*matsudaira*): A total of seven were observed at Tairo Ike and Toga Misaki.

Lesser Cuckoo: Common, but only three were actually seen, one of them a hepatic individual at Izu Misaki.

Izu Thrush: Rather common throughout, with many juvenile birds together with adult ones. My total in one and half days was around 160.

Red-bellied Rock Thrush: Relatively common by the coast. I support Brazil and others who have proposed to split the coastal *philippensis*.

Japanese Robin (*tanensis*): The Miyake Jima subspecies males lack the dark breast band of *akahige*. Relatively common, with best observations in the very beginning of the Tairo Ike road and at few other shadowy spots down the same track. Could be photographed easily if there was more light on its favorite feeding grounds.

Barn Swallow: A total of 6 were recorded on the 24th of June and 4 more on the next day, at Toga Misaki.

Japanese Bush Warbler: Common, especially around Tairo Ike.

Pleske's Warbler: Surprisingly easy to locate at Izu Misaki and Toga Misaki. The former had four territories by the lighthouse and the latter six. In addition, odd territorial males were observed in suitable habitats along the main coastal road and further in at Izu Misaki. Contrary to some references I had studied, males were not silent at this time of the year, but constantly singing, with females present, and appeared likely to stay active till early July. All in all, it was great to see the regenerated habitats and the apparent recovery of the breeding population.

Ijima's Warbler: Common around Tairo Ike (around 50), even though the species was initially a bit difficult to locate because of the abundance of **Japanese White-eyes**. The warblers were territorial and therefore usually spotted by their song.

Pacific Swift: Common throughout, and especially above mid-altitude slopes.

Wren (*mosuke*): Readily observed only by the Tairo Ike access road, but heard also along the coastal ring road 212. At the former site, an investigating individual almost entered my car, parked and used as a bird observation hide! Unfortunately, it was too close for photography...

Bull-headed Shrike: Only one roadside bird was noticed while driving between the main birding sites.

Brown-eared Bulbul (apparently *matchiae*): Very common, even though not really abundant, being most visible at Tairo Ike and Izu Misaki.

Chestnut-cheeked Starling: A party of four was seen at Izu Misaki. This and previous records seem to indicate range extension. My references do not indicate the species to occur on Izu Islands.

Owston's Tit (or *varius owstoni*): A total of 11 were seen at Tairo Ike forest, including a pair with four young ones. Their favorite spot was the parking area at the end of the access road, on the left. The splitting of the **Varied Tit** complex into three species (Japan, Izu Islands and Taiwan) appears to be well founded.

Eastern Great Tit: A total of five individuals were recorded at Izu Misaki and Tairo Ike.

Japanese White-eye (*stejgeneri*): Abundant (>1.000) throughout in woodlands and edge habitats.

Tree Sparrow: A few birds in coastal villages.

Oriental Greenfinch: Relatively common on the coast, e.g. Izu Misaki.

Meadow Bunting: Very common in grassland habitats, e.g. Izu Misaki and Toga Misaki. In the end of June, the males were still territorial, singing on top of bushes.

Large-billed Crow: Common throughout.



Fig. 12. A Meadow Bunting has located a tasty beetle on the Toga Misaki road and is ready to butcher it.



Fig. 13. A Pleske's Warbler at the Izu Misaki lighthouse, at full song and eager to defend its territory against his neighbors across the road. The warbler was habituated to people, who often visit the viewpoint.

SEABIRDS

After leaving the windy Takeshiba Pier (Tokyo Waterfront), the sea remained calm throughout, with only the swell creating an illusion of waves. On the way down to Miyake Jima, it was possible to observe seabirds between 4.15 and 5.00, just before arrival at sunrise. On the return voyage, observation conditions remained ideal for six hours, deep into the Bay of Tokyo. The sunset was at 19.15, 45 minutes before our arrival at the Takeshiba Pier.

On board of *Salvia Maru*, observations were made from two decks in the back of the ferry, where seats and shade were available, with good views of the passing or stationary seabirds. I made no breaks but focused on the birds, and the time passed swiftly. Food and drinks had been reserved for the occasion. On the island itself, my favorite spot was Toga Misaki (Toga Nature Park), which tended to have the best light conditions and offered close views of more seabirds than Izu Misaki, for example.



Fig. 14. The coast at Toga Misaki, a scene of many lava flows.

The calm conditions at the sea were ideal for spotting small murrelets and storm-petrels, even though there were not many around. In most cases, the floating objects in the sea proved to be pieces of rubbish. On the other hand, the calm weather clearly did not favor albatrosses and shearwaters.

My only (adult) **Japanese Murrelet** was recorded on arrival at Miyake Jima, soon after passing Sanbondake, their breeding islet. The bird floated in the sea, right next to the ferry, and gave excellent even though fleeting views. **Streaked Shearwaters** were abundant, particularly around Miyake Jima, but also within Tokyo Bay, with many tightly packed parties. Around 15,000 were counted each way, including thousands seen at headlands. In the end of June, other shearwaters are not necessarily seen on the route.

Instead, I saw a total of five **Tristram's** and two **Swinhoe's Storm-Petrels**, at locations which had some sort of floating food for them. The former species could be mistaken for a **Bulwer's Petrel**. No **Short-tailed** or other **albatrosses**, or **Bonin Petrels**, all of which potentially occur along the ferry route.

Miyake Jima appears to have a breeding population of **Band-tailed Gulls**, which were also present at Tokyo Bay. In the latter location, an unseasonal **Vega Gull** (adult in breeding plumage) and a **Swift Tern** were also recorded. On three occasions, a **Brown Booby** was seen at Toga Misaki; a good addition to one's Japan list. Additionally, lone **Arctic** and **Pomarine Skuas** (both light morph adults) were recorded on the same coast, the latter from the *Salvia Maru* ferry.

In regard to sea mammals, five **Long-beaked Common Dolphins** and five **Spotted Seals** were noted at Miyake Jima headlands. On the return trip, I made dozens of Japanese passengers happy by spotting two pods of about 30 and 20 **Short-finned Pilot Whales**, the first of them directly meeting our route. People greeted them, wishing the whales well, and photographed them by mobile phone cameras. One of the passengers thanked me three times for pointing out the whales!

On the Miyake Island, the only land mammal record was an introduced **Siberian Weasel** (at Izu Misaki), pretty but unfortunately lethal to the endemic bird populations, **Izu Thrushes** in particular.



Fig. 15. One of the many thousands: A **Streaked Shearwater** at sea. It is called **White-faced Shearwater**, too, for apparent reasons.

CONCLUSIONS

Tokyo is a convenient stop-over between the Pacific, Europe and North America. Japan in general is perhaps the most hospitable nation on Earth for a foreign visitor, because of its as a rule polite, helpful and welcoming citizens, and in general impeccably organized services. Well, as a Finn I may be a bit biased. I love things being on time. There also is something similar in the Japanese and Finnish mindsets and I consequently feel at home there, more so than in many other destinations.

With the weak yen, most services are very reasonably priced, as also witnessed by the prices listed in this report, and even more so in terms of their quality. It may be hot in summer, around +30C already in June, but cold drinks are available at vending machines all over the nation, and the mornings and the evenings are quite comfortable.

Moreover, Tokyo is a practical base for short but productive visits to Nansei Shoto (Okinawa & Amami Oshima), Izu Islands (Miyakejima), Tonegawa Wetlands and the mountain forests of Nagano, to name some of the options with target species of high degree of endemism. In other words, interesting combinations of destinations are available for tailor made journeys, including the possibility of visiting some neighboring countries, such as the Philippines, Marianas, Russian Far East, Taiwan and China.

Judging by the bird observations, late June was a good time to visit Miyake Jima. The first week of July probably would not be too late, either. Nevertheless, as already stated in the introduction, be sure to visit the Miyake Island before 2020, the predicted time of the next big eruption! Also a few years afterwards, the island is not likely to be as welcoming as it today is, with periodical sulphur gas eruptions and birding with a gas mask. Prior to the next eruption, the habitats and bird populations will only improve, till the inevitable volcanic setback.

