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MARSH GRASSBIRDS AND OCHRE-RUMPED BUNTINGS AT SASAGAWA, JAPAN, IN JUNE 2014

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In June 2014, I visited the island of Miyake, Izu Islands, from Tokyo, Japan. As the ferry to Miyake Jima is occasionally cancelled because of rough seas, it was necessary to include an extra day in my round-the-world birding itinerary. If everything went well, the day would be spent in search for three target species: **Japanese Green Woodpecker** (*Picus awokera*), **Marsh Grassbird** (*Megalurus pryeri*) and **Ochre-rumped Bunting** (*Emberiza yessoensis*). For the latter two species, Internet information (e.g. Björn Anderson's report) had pointed me to a location at Sasagawa, by Tonegawa River, Chiba prefecture. The first species is difficult to locate in the low hills of Chiba, but I did give it a try, too, after a tip from Yann at BirdForum.

The following report will explain how this was done in a single day, by public transportation, Narita City as my home base. The views and conclusions will be subjective, based on limited knowledge and limited skills in dealing with the local societal environment. Nevertheless, they may be useful for other traveling birders, who have a day or two in Tokyo, or perhaps a delayed transit at Narita, or who are otherwise interested in making the stop for these attractive regional endemics. I stayed at Narita U-City hotel, an affordable (€36, reserved by Agoda) and comfortable choice close to the main JR Narita City railway station, the gateway to Tonegawa and other sites further east along the railway line.

There is a plenitude of accommodation choices to choose from in Narita City. In regard to travel services, it makes sense to stay there. As one may expect, the town is well connected to Narita International Airport, the fastest connection (5 min) being the train (yen 290 (€2) one way) between the airport and the Keiseinarita Station, less than five minute walk away from the JR Line and the main railway station, and another five to 10 minutes away from several hotels in the area. By bus or taxi (yen 5.000 one way), both readily available, the transit takes more time (30 min), as a consequence of busy roads. Most hotels have a courtesy bus shuttle, but the operating hours may be limited early in the morning and late in the evening.

BY TRAIN TO SASAGAWA

On the 26th of June, I woke up at 6.00 and took the 6.40 JR train from Narita City to Sasagawa. An earlier departure would have been desirable, but I had gone to bed only at 1.00, after a long ferry and train transit from Miyake Jima, and needed the extra hour of sleep. A ticket to Sasagawa (yen 730, €5.30) was bought at a coin-operated machine (also in English) at the station, the correct platform was located on the information table and everything was checked out with fellow passengers on their way to the same direction. Yes, many Japanese speak good English and are normally helpful towards a foreign visitor, even if he is in field gear and carries not only a pair of binoculars and a camera, but also a trekking pole.



Fig. 1. The railroad signs were pretty and informative. This is Japan: neat, organized and beautiful.

THE TONE RIVER SITE

The river (Tonegawa) is not far from the Sasagawa station. It is easy to locate by walking one kilometer straight on, on the road 209-286 which starts at the station and arrives at a bridge across Kurobe River, just before reaching the Tone River (see Google Maps; the rivers run parallel there). In late June, the climate is however already hot and humid in this low coastal region, and I desired to make my life as easy as possible. There was, after all, plenty of walking ahead if one followed the Wild Watch Japan guidelines (www.wildwatchjapan.com) to look for the grassbird and the bunting. I therefore took a yen 730 (€5.30) taxi, even though my decision was initially resisted by the driver. He clearly thought that his services were not required for such a short distance.

What is more, even though I showed the driver a map and pointed out that I needed to get to the lock on the other side of Kurobe Bridge, where the road turns 90 degrees to the left, he had other ideas. At the southern end of the bridge, he explained something and abruptly turned right, driving to a hotel 200 meters further on. My protests did not help; I had to walk the remaining 500 meters back to the lock.

It was already getting really hot when I made another mistake. Having read the Wild Watch Japan advice in the Internet, I had the impression that one needed to walk long distances and survey the whole area in order to (possibly) locate the target species. I therefore decided to start by walking through the rice paddy

tracks on the left, instead of walking the 50 meters straight to the lock. Another section of the riverside marsh would follow and, if necessary, the whole 10 km hiking program suggested by WWJ.



Fig. 2. The Sasagawa Station ticket sales and waiting area. Vending machines and public toilets are around the corner, and a taxi is waiting for customers in the front of the entrance.

Once again, the Wild Watch Japan information was more about hiking in the nature and being occupied for a whole day than of 'doing' the species with minimum effort. After a walk of one kilometer, I had lost a lot of sweat, burned the skin of my head and had only been able to hear the target species in the north, behind an embankment by the Tone River. Along the Kurobe River, I once got fleeting views of a flying **Ochre-rumped Bunting**. Other birds were around, and I enjoyed watching them, but this clearly was not the correct approach.

(It is important to cover one's head and neck well at this location, to decrease sunburn and exhaustion. I made a temporary hat out of a bag, but that was too little too late for a bald guy. The skin peeled off during the next week or so).

In the end, I finally did what I should have done straight away, by returning to the bridge and walking to the lock. One **Marsh Grassbird** sang briefly on the Kurobe side. More importantly, two territorial males were actively singing and making display flights on the left of the lock, along a short track to a row of boats. Two

Japanese birders were already there, taking photographs with a long lens. Further in, there were at least three singing **Ochre-rumped Buntings**, in the late morning (10.30-11.30) +32C heat.

The locals had simply driven to the lock by a car and walked 40 meters to the target species. This I would suggest everybody else to do; to walk there, secure the target species and spend the rest of the time looking for other birds, if desired.



Fig. 3. The Lock at Tonegawa. On the left, the track to a row of boats. Both target species were easy in the reeds in the background.

Among other bird observations, the following were of particular interest:

In this region, the large cormorants could be either **Great** or **Japanese**. Some sources exclude the other species in their distribution maps, some others the other. All the birds I could study closely did, however, display the identification features of a **Japanese Cormorant**. An **Eurasian Bittern**, a rare bird on Honshu, was booming close to the lock.

A **Long-billed Plover** and an **Ashy Minivet** were apparently already on migration, in a habitat not suitable for them for breeding. Among the scarcer residents, **Black-crowned Night-Herons** and an **Osprey** were also recorded. **Oriental Reed Warblers** were common and noisy in the reed-beds.



Fig. 4. A **(Japanese) Marsh Grassbird** at the lock: the males were constantly singing and displaying.



Fig. 5. A male **Ochre-rumped Bunting** at the same site. It was a challenge to focus a camera on in a sea of reeds. The reeds were constantly moving in a light wind!

TONOSHO CITIZENS' FOREST

Satisfied with my observations, I walked back to the Sasagawa Station, where the next train further east, to Shimosa-Toyosato Station, arrived at 13.00 (yen 200, €1.46). The small waiting area was cool with breeze, cold drinks could be purchased at a vending machine and a public toilet was discovered next to the station. At Shimosa-Toyosato, on the other hand, they had neither staff nor taxis, not to mention ticket sales, just a waiting area with timetables. A taxi was necessary to reach Tonosho Citizens' Forest, a cluster of forested hills 6.5 km to the west, and also the location of the Hachimandaijin Temple. **Japanese Green Woodpeckers**, uncommon in Chiba, breed there. Alternatively, one could stop at Shimosa-Tachibana station. The distances are about the same.



Fig. 6. A view from one of the forested hills of Tonosho Citizens' Forest, by a temple. The reservoir, next to the temple, helps one to identify the site at Google Maps.

After discovering that the two passengers waiting for the next train to Tokyo did not speak English, I walked 100 meters to the small town and went into the first shop in the first crossing. The lady in charge kindly made a call for a taxi somewhere 10 minutes away, and accepted a small compensation for the call. I bought more drinks while waiting at the nearest vending machine, together with the helpful lady. The taxi driver agreed to pick me up again at 17.00, for the 17.20 train to Narita City, and charged yen 4.500 (€33) for the two rides. In the end at the JR Shimosa-Toyosato Station, he gave me a bottle of water and also showed the right button to push for a ticket, which could be paid on arrival in Narita City.

The train ride to Narita City was yen 930 one way, the three rides of the day being yen 1.860 in total (€13.50). The counter for paying the above-mentioned fee was on the right after taking the escalator up at JR Narita City Station, by the entrance/departure gates.



Fig. 7. If I remember correctly, by pushing the small button on the top right corner of the orange box, one received a ticket which could be paid at the destination, in my case JR Narita City station.

Unfortunately, I failed to see the **Japanese Green Woodpecker**. Tonosho Citizens Forest had the right habitats and a breeding pair had been observed there earlier in the season. It is, however, a large area to be surveyed in few afternoon hours, and the afternoon is not the best time for spotting woodpeckers, either.

The most interesting record in the forest was an adult female **Northern Goshawk**, which carried its jay-sized prey (**Japanese Green Woodpecker**?! I hope not...) across a valley, quite possibly for chicks at a nest. The species probably is a rare breeder in this part of Honshu, but it is easily mistaken as a **Sparrowhawk** by observers not familiar with the two northern sister species. In Finland, they are among the most common birds of prey. An **Azure-winged Magpie** was another good find. On the short way to the hotel in Narita City, 2.000 **White-cheeked Starlings** were seen to gather for a street-side roost, and more birds kept on arriving.

The next morning, I took the 6.50 hotel shuttle bus to Narita International Airport, Terminal 2. It arrived at 7.24. At 8.00 I was already at the JAL gate for Manila, the Philippines. In other words, a priority check in, immigration and security check took 26 minutes at a well-organized airport.

I wish more airport authorities and airline representatives would study the management of airports in Japan, and in other equally efficient destinations, to upgrade their respective services. Nevertheless, one needs to keep in mind that the inability to run airports in an efficient way often reflects deeper cultural norms and practices, which may prevent the repetition of procedures across cultural borderlines.

CONCLUSIONS

Judging by my experiences, visiting the Tone River site at Sasagawa is easy by public transportation, as a consequence of well-placed services. Even a person with limited skills and experience such as I myself could do it. Well, at least if one avoids the tactical mistakes I initially made and goes straight to the lock, deciding what to do next only after locating the key species. Taking the first morning train to Sasagawa would also be preferable, if possible. The earlier, the better.

I did my visit from Narita City, but with an early start, one could also do the trip from Metropolitan Tokyo. The train timetables are in the Internet and the most recent ones are shown at railway station information tables. The shops and vending machines of the stations, or supermarkets close by, have all the food and drinks one may need on the way, and traveling by train is a pleasure in rural Japan. East of Narita, the trains were not crowded and it was possible to observe birds, too. Personally, I cannot wait for my next visit in Japan. It will probably focus on **Japanese Green Woodpecker**, **Copper Pheasant** and **Yellow Bunting**. If only someby with local knowledge would be ready to help, **Japanese Night-Heron** would be on my list, too.



Fig. 8 There were many common wetland species in Sasagawa, too, such as **Grey Herons**.