

Short report: Tokyo March 11-13th 2015 (including nearby Saitama and Gunma prefectures)

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While on a business trip in Tokyo March 9–14th I had the opportunity to do some birding during two early mornings in the Shinjuku area of Tokyo and a full day north of the city.

Through his website [www7b.biglobe.ne.jp/~japan-birding] I managed to get in contact with a local Japanese birder, Mr Masayuki Shimada, on a very short notice (I didn't realize I could have a whole day off until I had arrived in Japan). Shimada kindly offered me to join him on the Friday and go with his car to visit a few places in the Saitama and Gunma prefectures just north of Tokyo. His English was excellent and he also brought a scope. For all the locations we went that day, my guess is that it would be a challenge or at least time consuming to go by public transportation.

Mid-March is still early spring in Tokyo, which means slumbering vegetation with bare trees and quite chilly mornings. It is some two weeks before the famous cherry blossom (Sakura). Bird-wise it is transition to spring migration and although there is some movement, most wintering species including ducks appeared to be still lingering in good numbers and it is not until later in March early long-distance migrating passerines such as Barn Swallows etc. start to arrive. Sunrise is around 6:00 am and it's getting dark after 5:45 pm.

I had been to eastern China before, but as this was my first visit to Japan it still meant a bunch of new acquaintances including quite a few eastern races with distinct appearance. The obvious alternative on a short visit to Tokyo is otherwise to go to some of the coastal localities to look for gulls, marine ducks and waders. Many species such as thrushes and sparrows were surprisingly confiding, unlike some other places I have visited in Asia, so I definitely regret not bringing my camera. Another recommendation from Shimada, that I didn't have time to explore, was the moat near Sakurada-mon of the Imperial Palace (near Tokyo station) for wintering Falcated Duck, *A. falcata*, and the pond named Tamamo-Ike in the Shinjuku-Gyoen park (near south entrance of Shinjuku station) for Baikal Teal, *A. formosa*. Mid-March could be a little late in the season though.

For my on record, and for anyone in a similar situation who could find this information useful, I have compiled a short description of the places visited and a list of the birds noted.

Places visited (in chronological order)

Tokyo prefecture

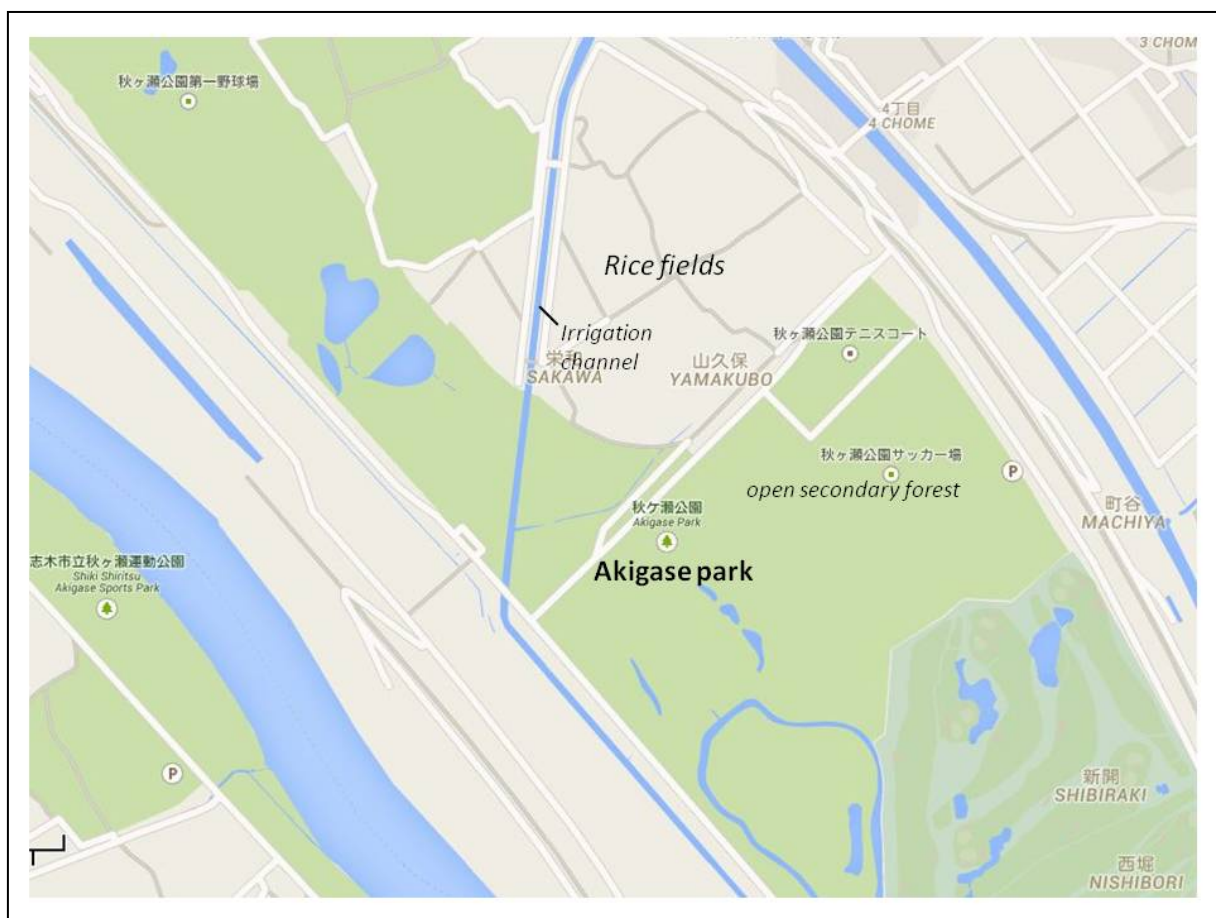
Shinjuku Central park (Shinjuku area, WSG84 decimal coordinates 35.68937'N/139.68961'E). Visited the morning March 11th. A small park next to my hotel, Hyatt Regency. Not worth a special visit perhaps, but the common urbanized species are present and I did see both several Dusky and a Pale thrush here very early in the morning before the crowds arrived.

Meiji Shrine (Shinjuku area, 35.67598'N/139.69941'E). Situated some 30 min by foot SW of Shinjuku station, this is one of central Tokyo's biggest parks. Large part of the area is mature forest with plenty of good looking undergrowth. In the north end there is a big lawn and a secluded pond. Unlike many other parks in Tokyo that do not open until 9am or so, this one has the advantage of changing the opening hours according to the sunrise which means you can go there early mornings when it is not too many people around. Surprisingly good birding for a park located in central Tokyo. Unfortunately I only had between 06:30-07:45 on the morning of March 12th to visit this place, it probably would

have yielded more with additional time spent here. Good numbers of Pale Thrush in the undergrowth, so even though I missed it I assume this could be a place to find also the eastern specialty Brown-headed Thrush, *T. chrysolaus* (still possible in early March, but much easier in April and later as I understand).

Saitama prefecture

Akigase Park (35.85031°N/139.60623°E). For the full day birding together with Shimada on March 13th, this was the first place we visited in the early morning. Akigase Park is some 20 km NNW from Shinjuku station in Tokyo and located at a section of the Arakawa River flowing along the western edge of Saitama City. An open secondary forest with clearings and surrounding recreation facilities such as playgrounds, a baseball field, tennis courts etc. Likely to be much more busy in the weekends. Walking round the small paths yielded a good variety of woodland and grassland species. The nearby (still dry) rice fields with an irrigation channel gave some additional birds.



Lake Saiko (35.82905°N/139.62748°E). An artificial water reservoir near Akigase Park where we made a short stop to look at the resting coots, ducks and grebes before going north on the freeway to Gunma. Surrounded by mowed lawns, and overall not too exciting.

Gunma prefecture

Tatara Marsh (36.25894°N/139.49294°E). Two stops around a smaller lake surrounded by wetland with reeds by lunch time. Ducks, swans, herons and other water birds, but also the only Japanese Wagtails of the trip and a few other passerines.



Itakura Rice Field ($36.23458^{\circ}N/139.61769^{\circ}E$). Close to Watarase on the western side. We drove around on dirt roads, often along irrigation channels, scanning the still dry rice fields which yielded Buff-bellied Pipits, Japanese Skylarks and a few other passerines. This is also a known wintering place for fair numbers of Rooks. Daurian Jackdaws sometimes mix in with these flocks, a rare but apparently regular wintering species in this area.

Pond near Tokai University ($36.22558^{\circ}N/139.63486^{\circ}E$). Short stop on the way to Watarase to check out the many ducks still around. A good variety of water birds at close distance.

Watarase Retarding Basin/Watarase-Yusuichi ($36.23181^{\circ}N/139.67915^{\circ}E$). Last place visited on the 13th in the late afternoon until dusk. About 65 km north of central Tokyo this is a large (almost 3000ha) wetland area including a big heart-shaped water basin which had recently been dried out deliberately (for unknown reason). A good place to see various water birds including several species of waders on migration. Also known for migrating Harriers this time of the year and plenty of passerines, especially sparrows and finches, around too. The whole area is apparently burnt every year in late March, so a visit a few weeks later would mean a much more open habitat. The only mammal of the trip was noted here – a confiding Japanese weasel, *Mustela (sibirica) itatsi*.

Species account

1. **Chinese Bamboo Partridge *Bambusicola thoracicus***. A very confiding pair seen together in the open along one of the forest trails in Akigase Park. Introduced species in Japan.
2. **Japanese Green Pheasant *Phasianus versicolor***. A pair seen briefly inside the reeds along an irrigation channel near Akigase Park. Later in Watarase prolonged views close to dusk of a beautiful male feeding in the open in a grassy area (Watarase should be a good spot for this common endemic).
3. **Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus***. 1 + 12 Tatara Marsh. Most of the wintering swans had recently left according to Shimada.
4. **Mute Swan *Cygnus olor***. One adult in Tatara Marsh.
5. **Mandarin Duck *Aix galericulata***. 2 pairs north ponds Meiji Shrine. Fairly reliable place for this species apparently.
6. **Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope***. Noted at all ponds and wetlands visited. Probably the most numerous duck seen with largest count in the big pond at Tatara marsh with at least 250.
7. **Gadwall *Anas strepera***. 3 males and 3 females together in a small pond Watarase.
8. **Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos***. Common and widespread. Noted at all ponds and wetlands visited.
9. **Spotbill Duck *Anas zonorhyncha***. Noted at most ponds and wetlands visited including the north pond Meiji Shrine.
10. **Northern Shoveller *Anas clypeata***. First noted with 20+ in the pond near Tokai University, then at least 30 in Watarase.
11. **Northern Pintail *Anas acuta***. Some 30 birds in the big pond at Tatara Marsh was the only place this species was seen.
12. **Green-winged Teal *Anas crecca***. Noted at most ponds and wetlands visited, also in ditches and irrigation channels.
13. **Common Pochard *Athya ferina***. Noted with 20–50 individuals each in Lake Saiko, Tatara marsh, the pond near Tokai University and in Watarase.
14. **Tufted Duck *Athya fuligula***. Noted in few numbers in Lake Saiko, Tatara marsh and the pond near Tokai University.
15. **Smew *Margellus albellus***. A female-coloured bird Tatara marsh and 2 males + 1 female-coloured at the pond near Tokai University.
16. **Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis***. Race *poggei* with its pale eyes. Several Tatara marsh and common Watarase.
17. **Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus***. 2 in Lake Saiko, 5–6 Tatara marsh and 2 in the pond near Tokai University. Still largely in winter plumage.
18. **Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea***. Common. Noted in all ponds/wetlands visited and also seen along irrigation channels.
19. **Great Egret *Casmerodius alba***. A total of maybe 15 birds including a few seen from the bus along the big rivers in central Tokyo. Both *modestus* and *albus* noted according to colour of the tibia (pink or black in breeding season, respectively).
20. **Little Egret *Egretta garzetta***. 1 seen in Tatara marsh was the only record.
21. **Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo***. Common in wetlands, seen several times flying by in central Tokyo.
22. **Merlin *Falco columbianus***. 1 perched in a tree Watarase close to dusk.
23. **Black Kite *Milvus migrans***. Race *lineatus*. Numerous in Watarase, otherwise just noted with a few individuals in Tatara marsh and over the Itakura Rice Fields.
24. **Eastern Marsh Harrier *Circus spilonotus***. At least 5 seen in Watarase in the late afternoon. All female-coloured. Apparently dusk is a good time to see the harriers in Watarase and a lot of photographers with huge lenses were there too.
25. **Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus***. Two female-coloured and an adult male in Watarase in the late afternoon.
26. **Common Buzzard *Buteo buteo***. Race *japonicus*. At least 5 Watarase. Like nominate also very variable, one bird with very light plumage.

27. **Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra***. Common Lake Saiko, Tatara marsh and Watarase. Also noted once in a river in central Tokyo.
28. **Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus***. A single bird seen Tatara marsh.
29. **Northern Lapwing *Vanellus vanellus***. A group of 6 birds Watarase.
30. **Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus***. A single feeding bird Watarase.
31. **Long-billed Dowitcher *Limnodromus scolopaceus***. Two birds at close range on a river mudflat. A surprise to me, but in Watarase this North American wader is apparently a regular wintering species in small numbers.
32. **Vega Gull *Larus vegae***. A few noted in central Tokyo and also one Lake Saiko near Akigase park. To be honest not studied in detail to exclude e.g. *taimurensis* that would be uncommon but regular in the area also.
33. **Black-headed Gull *Larus ridibundus***. One 2 cy in central Tokyo.
34. **Feral pigeon *Columba livia***. Common in the urban areas.
35. **Oriental Turtle Dove *Streptopelia orientalis***. Common and widespread including parks in central Tokyo. Very confiding and often seen on the ground down to 2–3 metres like any street pigeon. All looked like race *orientalis*, not sure to what extent *meena* would be possible to see in Japan.
36. **Common Kingfisher *Alcedo atthis***. Two birds Tatara marsh.
37. **Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker *Yungipicus kizuki***. 4–5 birds Akigase park including a pair at close range low in a tree. The male red spot is usually not visible in the field. Distinctive call.
38. **Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopus major***. Several in Akigase park and one noted by the pond near Tokai University. Race *japonicus* with larger white spots in primaries.
39. **Bull-headed Shrike *Lanius bucephalus***. 1 male in a clearing in Akigase park and a male + female in the nearby rice fields along an irrigation channel.
40. **Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius***. Common and fairly easily seen Akigase park. Race *japonicus* with black face.
41. **Rook *Corvus frugilegus***. Not counted, but maybe up to 200 birds in total around the Itakura rice fields. Race *pastinator* with clearly darker bill compared to the western Rooks I am used to, only the base of the bill lighter.
42. **Large-billed Crow *Corvus macrorhynchos***. Common and widespread. By far outnumbering the Oriental Crows in central Tokyo, at least in the Shinjuku area where I stayed.
43. **Oriental Crow *Corvus corone***. Entirely black race *orientalis*. Common and widespread including central Tokyo. As previous species frequently seen displaying and collecting nesting material.
44. **Japanese Waxwing *Bombycilla japonica***. Four birds seen in a solitary tree with a lot of mistletoes in Akigase park. Bohemian Waxwings, *B. garrulus*, should otherwise be the more common species here in the winter.
45. **Great Tit *Parus major***. Dull taxon *minor* with only some yellowish-green on the mantle. Common and widespread, also in the small Shinjuku central park near my hotel in Tokyo.
46. **Varied Tit *Parus varius***. Nominate race. Surprisingly common Meiji Shrine even outnumbering the Great Tits. Seemed to have initiated breeding activities with a lot of courtship, territorial fighting and nest hole inspection.
47. **Long-tailed Tit *Aegithalos caudatus***. 1 Meiji Shrine and common Akigase park. One of the races with broad black head-sides.
48. **Eurasian Skylark *Alauda arvensis***. Race *japonica*. Several singing over the rice fields near Akigase park and also many around the Itakura Rice Fields. Also noted from the aircraft when landing at Narita airport.
49. **Brown-eared Bulbul *Hypsipetes amaurotis***. Common and widespread near-endemic, including central Tokyo where even noted in trees along the busy streets. Very vocal.
50. **Japanese Bush-warbler *Cettia diphone***. 1 singing in the morning at Meiji Shrine. 2-3 singing and calling Akigase park. Very common/abundant Watarase and constantly heard singing from vegetation in all directions in the late afternoon. One bird easily taped in and seen well here, otherwise hard to get good looks of.

51. **Japanese White-eye *Zosterops japonicus***. 2 Meiji Shrine and a few noted Akigase park. No larger groups encountered.
52. **White-cheeked Starling *Sturnus cineraceus***. Common and widespread in smaller groups, including central Tokyo.
53. **Pale Thrush *Turdus pallidus***. One Shinjuku Central Park, 15+ Meiji Shrine and 10-15 noted in Akigase park. A bit variable depending on sex and age. Compared to Dusky thrush more often sticks to understorey within forest.
54. **Dusky Thrush *Turdus eunomus***. Common and widespread. Probably 75+ in Watarase. Several on lawns in Shinjuku Central Park and Meiji Shrine in the early mornings before the crowds arrive. Not very shy and usually easy to approach, quite variable contrast in the plumage depending on sex and age.
55. **Red-flanked Bluetail *Tarsiger cyanura***. A fairly confiding silent female-coloured bird along one of the paved forest roads in Meiji Shrine was the only observation.
56. **Daurian Redstart *Phoenicurus aureoreus***. A female Meiji Shrine, 2 males and a female Watarase.
57. **White Wagtail *Motacilla alba***. Race *lugens* with its strikingly white wings in flight noted at most places with 1–3 individuals, including Meiji Shrine and Shinjuku Central Park in central Tokyo. Mostly adults, but also some duller 2cy birds.
58. **Japanese Wagtail *Motacilla grandis***. A pair + a lone bird by a wooden pier along the big pond in Tatara marsh. Distinctive sharper dryer call compared to *lugens*, more like Grey Wagtail, *M. cinerea* (which I didn't see, but should be quite common here too).
59. **Buff-bellied Pipit *Anthus rubescens***. Race *japonicus*. 10+ noted at Narita airport and 50+ in loose small flocks around the Itakura Rice Fields.
60. **Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus***. Common and widespread.
61. **Brambling *Fringilla montifringilla***. A flock of 50+ birds perched in a solitary tree on the north lawns in Meiji Shrine.
62. **Oriental Greenfinch *Serinus sinica***. Common Akigase park and also big flocks with several hundreds feeding in the Itakura Rice Fields. Also noted in few numbers en route.
63. **Hawfinch *Coccothraustes coccothraustes***. Race *japonicus*. 1 Meiji Shrine, common Akigase park and also a few noted in Watarase. Quite often seen on the ground or in low trees compared to home where the birds usually prefer the high canopies.
64. **Meadow Bunting *Emberiza cioides***. Race *ciopsis* with a black eye-stripe, making the appearance quite different from birds further west in Asia. Fairly common and widespread. Several Akigase park and nearby irrigation channel and common Watarase. Also noted en route. Males in breeding plumage.
65. **Rustic Bunting *Emberiza rustica***. A flock of at least 75 Akigase park and 3–4 sightings of 2–10 birds mainly in reeds in Watarase. A few males close to complete breeding plumage.
66. **Black-faced Bunting *Emberiza spodocephala***. Common and widespread. Very common Akigase park. 2 noted Meiji Shrine. A few males in breeding plumage. Japanese birds belong to race *personata*, strikingly more yellow compared to birds further west in Asia.
67. **Reed Bunting *Emberiza schoeniclus***. 10 in reeds along an irrigation channel Akigase park, 25+ around the Itakura Rice Fields and several sightings Watarase. Males yet to assume breeding plumage.