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MT. MITUTOUGE, FUJI AREA, JAPAN



Fig. 1. N'EX route from Narita Airport to Kawaguchiko, in the Mt. Fuji area.

In 2016, July 1st to 4th, I had a stop-over in Tokyo, between two other birding destinations, Peru and Indonesia. The time in Japan was spent, in addition to enjoying Japan in general, in an attempt to try to find a **Japanese Leaf Warbler** (meboso-mushikui), one of the two breeding species I still missed on the main islands of Japan (excluding Ryukyu and Bonin islands). As it turned out to be, I did not only find three **Japanese Leaf Warblers** but also stumbled on a **Japanese Night Heron**, the other missing bird species!

The **Japanese Leaf Warbler** (*Phylloscopus xanthodryas*) is an interesting taxonomical discovery. Originally, it was thought to be a subspecies of **Arctic Warbler** (*P. borealis*), but was split as a southern subspecies of **Kamchatka Leaf Warbler** (*P. examinandus*). At some point, somebody noted that it had a very different song and a closer look was taken. There are morphological (larger than the other two) and plumage differences (in general, more olive/yellow), too. Locating a **Japanese Leaf Warbler** by its song is exceptionally easy, because of their strange territorial

behavior. Unlike most other passerines, they keep on singing from late May to early October, the whole length of their breeding season stay in Japan!

The following text has been provided for other birders visiting Japan, not only for those two species, but for Mt. Mitutouge (also known as Mt. Mitsutoge, or Mitsu-toge). The mountain is perhaps not a well-known birding destination but a great alternative to the crowded and restricted Mt. Fuji next to it. Mt. Mitutouge is good for forest birds and mammals, too, and may easily be accessed by tarmac forest roads and well-developed trails. Overall, Mt. Mitutouge is a great alternative to the iconic destination, with a chance to both see Mt. Fuji and to enjoy wildlife in relative peace at the same time; a win-win situation. In fact, the best views of Mt. Fuji can be obtained from the top of Mt. Mitutouge, as many Japanese observers may witness.

Personally, I went there because Japanese breeding bird atlas, Xeno-Canto and BirdLife materials indicated the leaf warbler's presence in the area. There are other sites on the mountains of Honshu, but Mt. Mitutouge appeared to be the easiest place to visit. The access point was selected after a satellite image analysis of subalpine conifer habitats suitable for the **Japanese Leaf Warbler**, at 1.500-2.500 m. There are other roads and trails on the eastern slope of the mountain.

As the visit was a short one and the number of species encountered was limited to 46, a list of all observed bird species will be provided in this report. Keep in mind that it was an early July visit, and a brief one. Many additional species can undoubtedly be recorded in the area, in season and with more time to spend.

For a few day stop-over in Narita, Tokyo, there are a few classical birding choices: Karuizawa by the Mt. Asama, in Nagano Prefecture (by bullet train), Tone River marshes in the east, in Chiba Prefecture (by local train), Miyakejima Island in the south, in Izu Islands (by a daily ferry) and Mt. Fuji area (today, by bullet or local train), the latter also for the **Yellow Bunting**. In regard to birds, all of these sites are immensely more rewarding than the parks of Tokyo, and easy to reach. Japan has a great network of public transportation; fast, highly efficient and extremely reliable.

PRELUDE

In some countries, the arrival is a challenge and one needs to be both alert and prepared. Some other destinations do, however, belong to a completely different category; you will be looked after! Japan is a prime example of the latter category.

I therefore did not worry at all even though I knew I would be deadbeat on arrival. My route and timetable would guarantee that. A wake up at Jaén, Peru, at 05.45, was followed by driving and birding my way to Piura, arriving there 12 hours later, for a LATAM flight to Lima. An American Airlines flight to Dallas-Ft.Worth followed, after a nowadays customary AA delay of two hours.

As a further courtesy of AA, I got a freezing economy window seat. Of course, they had no blankets. Overall, the cabin crew was third rate, also by AA standards, and had it difficult to do their job, as I had already noticed at the departure gate. They just looked on, when I entered the security area, as a test, and could have continued to the plane by myself! Only one elderly female member of the crew took notice and acted, after a while. I guess she belonged to the previous generation of the AA personnel, before things started to go astray.



Fig. 2. Japan Airlines (JAL); one of my favorite airlines.

In Dallas, my transit was on a fast E2 lane which bypassed the customs and had the self-service immigration procedure. JAL 11 to Tokyo was sold out and I ended again in an economy window seat. Not a problem really, because I now had entered the comforts of Japan, with a crew which did their best to make the long flight a relaxed one. The jet was up-to-date and had electrochromic windows, heated and dimmable by touch.

More warmth was provided by a young Japanese woman next to me. After one and half beers, she slept her head against my shoulder. A stewardess showed her disapproval of this code-breaking behavior but I prevented her from waking the woman up. She appeared to need her rest and looked so cute snoring there! It was time to choose a movie, out of a selection of hundreds of options. I chose some Japanese samurai movies, of course.

A day was lost by crossing the Pacific east to west. 13 hours later, we arrived in Narita, 40 minutes early, after a timely departure in Dallas. JAL has been extremely reliable in this sense, despite variable weather conditions during the many flights I have had a pleasure to fly with them during the past years. All in all, I had been traveling non-stop for a total of 46 hours, but nevertheless felt invigorated by the fact that I was in Japan!

A visit to JR airport office followed and I left with a train pass, for a reduced price and new, direct connections! A shuttle took me to the four-star Nikko Narita, where a €48 room (Agoda price) waited, after I had bought some groceries for the next day, at Lawson (Japanese company, second largest convenience store chain, originally from Cuayhoga Falls, Ohio) downstairs. Soon I was in a hot bath, with a cold Bacardi Rum Highball as a company. A fine bed with clean, crisp sheets was ideal for a rest. I could sleep 14 hours before waking up again, to start my journey to Mt. Fuji area.

TRANSIT TO KAWAGUCHIKO AND BACK

The next morning, I left most of my luggage at Nikko Narita, carrying only a field shoulder bag (with food and drinks), my bins and a trekking pole. The 08.25 shuttle bus took me to Narita T2 and its railway station. After a while, N'EX (Narita Express) bullet train to Mt. Fuji arrived. The new train had only few passengers in the beginning and the seats were very comfortable. It was easy to relax, have a breakfast and enjoys the views of Tokyo, including a number of birds by the tracks.

The drive was slow and took three hours to be completed, via Chiba, Shinyuku, Tachikawa, Otsuki and Fujikyū to Kawaguchiko. There were many short stops at various railway stations and a longer one at Fujikyū, where it is necessary to reverse the train.



Fig. 3. Bullet trains at Kawaguchiko railway station: Fujisan View Express on the left and Narita Express (N'EX) on the right, the latter ready for boarding.

Only towards the very end, a “salaryman’s Saturday” disturbed my pleasure a little bit. The man next to me was somewhat intoxicated on arrival, but managed to down a few more highballs while having a massive packed meal, before an open-mouth nap with loud snoring. Well, I guess he had earned these weekend pleasures!

The ticket costs yen 10.000 (€85) return, but by buying a three-day Wider Tokyo Train Pass, it was possible to get a 30% reduction (yen 7.000 = €59). Never mind if you need train travel only during two days. One may still purchase the three-day pass, and either do something else on the third day or leave it there, if in need to depart Japan. It is perhaps not a budget price, but the service is impeccable and the ride also serves as a sightseeing tour through the metropolitan Tokyo area, all up to the mountains which are characterized by small towns and villages.

The train station in Kawaguchiko is small and crowded by tourists. In fact, it may be difficult to find a vacant seat to sit down there while waiting for the gates to open. On my return day, I was tired after the long walk in the forest and therefore not happy to see the N’EX by the platform, very inviting with its air-conditioning and great seats, while waiting two hours for a permission to enter.



Fig. 4. Kawaguchiko railway station, busy with tourists and weekend visitors. At this point, the place is less crowded than it was during the preceding two hours.

After the 14.18 departure, everything went as smoothly as the day before, and we arrived at Narita T2 right on time, as can be expected in Japan. At Nikko Narita, a member of the staff did not appreciate my field attire but demanded to know if I really had a reservation there. His colleagues brought me my luggage and a room key.

IN KAWAGUCHIKO

The north side of Mt. Fuji has plenty of accommodation, but it is also a very popular destination during the main climbing season, from 1st July to the end of August. Either arrive outside the high season, or book your accommodation early. It is not going to be cheap, but the room rates are fortunately not quite as high as in Karuizawa, the other popular mountain destination.

I did my reservation in March, with Agoda, and stayed in the Sawa Hotel (a business hotel) for €60, in a comfortable room with a view of Mt. Fuji. It was not too far from the railway station, by foot, and there was a Lawson conveniently on the way. The supermarket also solved a small problem I had. As there were no garbage bins in the town, I did not know where to leave my rubbish. At Lawson's, the staff readily took care of it, releasing my other hand for a more important task, carrying a full bag of their products!

At the hotel, the reception was helpful with local travel arrangements. We first checked the bus timetables, but reading them proved to be difficult, because of my somewhat unusual destination, the Mt. Mitutouge trailhead (Misaka-michi). In any case, it became clear that there was no predawn or early enough bus connection to that direction, and I needed one. My time was restricted and I had to be in the right habitat by sunrise.

The receptionist therefore called a taxi driver and we negotiated a deal with him. The driver said that he could unfortunately not start quite as early as I requested (04.30), but the departure could be at 04.50. The ride up would cost yen 4.500, less than the yen 6.000 estimated by the receptionist. Relieved, I went to my room to relax there, preparing myself for the next day. As usual, the local television proved to be rather entertaining and educative.

ACCESS TO MT. MITUTOUGE

In the morning, I found the taxi in front of the hotel already at 04.40. The driver was sleeping there and had apparently been doing that for a while! We proceeded towards Misaka-michi, the access to the trailhead. First, we followed road 137 north of Kawaguchiko, and then turned right to road 708, just before the entrance of a rather long tunnel (137). After 4.5 km, at the easternmost point of the meandering 708, there is an access road to the Mt. Mitutouge trailhead, at 35.556197, 138.792098.

As the total distance proved to be greater (13 km) than the driver had mistakenly estimated, he stopped the meter at yen 3.960 (€33), at yen 540 less than his quote, and drove the remaining distance (worth about yen 1.000) without charge. He did not accept a tip to cover the difference. These details may give some idea of the codes honor these gentlemen follow, unlike taxi drivers in many other destinations.



Fig. 5. The key access point; Misaka-michi junction to Mt. Mitutouge trailhead (behind me), with a bus waiting for people to return to Kawaguchiko.

For the return trip, it would have been easy to enter one of the noon-time tourist buses which brought hikers to the trailhead access, and return to Kawaguchiko that way. Unlike the receptionist had assumed, there was plenty of daytime traffic on the Misaka-michi Road. I had, however, already agreed to go back by a taxi, and a colleague of the early morning driver was going to pick me up before 12.00. To make things easier, I walked 2.5 km down the slow, meandering part, as I had promised to do, when discussing the details with the first driver. The second driver spotted me there and downhill we went, to Kawaguchiko. He did, however, not turn the meter on before we arrived at the main road, close to the entrance of a tunnel. As a result, the return drive to 'railway station Lawson' cost yen 3.640 (€31). I do not really understand how I earned this special treatment from them.

At the mountain, I had expected steep, stony trails. Instead, the dotted lines of Google Maps images proved to be narrow tarmac roads! I did not enter the trail to the mountain top (at 1.786 m) itself, because there appeared to be no advantages in doing so, in regard to my target bird, the **Japanese Leaf Warbler**. They live at lower altitude. Instead, I walked the access road between the Misaka-michi Road (708) and trailhead parking area, turning right there and following the drivable road up (very infrequent cars). The route eventually reaches Kawaguchiko and the railway station, but the 18 km distance was too much for me (not enough time, not fit enough!). Instead, I walked some two kilometers up and returned to the Misaka-michi Road (708), via the parking area. 2.5 h up, 2 h down, and 2 h on Road 708.

During my four days in Japan, the weather remained stable: calm, sunny and hot (noon to afternoon, +20 - +28C). In other words, the conditions were quite pleasant for observations. What is more, still early in season, birds remained active and vocal. On the mountains of Honshu, with the winter snow, summer does not start as early as at lower altitudes. On the 3rd of July, snow had nevertheless completely disappeared on top of Mt. Fuji and the climbing season had just been officially opened, the day before. The forest road was peaceful as almost all the other visitors were hiking on the Mt. Mitutouge peak trail, leaving me alone with the birds and the animals.



Fig. 6. Cute as a button, a Tentmushi camper was parked at Mt. Mitutouge trailhead parking area.

BIRDS AND MAMMALS

What did I see during the trip? Predominantly the regular birds of the forests of Southern Honshu, some urban dwellers and the two key target species. All the recorded bird species have been included in the following list.

In addition, a **Sika Deer** and a group of five **Japanese Macaques** were observed at Mt. Mitutouge. Fortunately, the latter were not aggressive like their cousins at Mt. Emei, China PRC! Still haunted by the memory of the latter, I picked some stones and kept on looking over my shoulder, just in case...



Fig. 7. Bird photography was not my priority at Mt. Mitutouge; a Blue-and-white Flycatcher in the shadows of the forest.

BIRD LIST

Mallard	3, hybrids at Kawaguchiko (lake), 1 male at Fujikyū.
Eastern Spot-billed Duck	5+1, in Tokyo, by the railway line.
Japanese Night Heron	1, calling at a site described below, Mt. Mitutouge.
Grey Heron	4, seen from the bullet train, in Tokyo.
Eastern Honey Buzzard	1, on the mountains close to Kawaguchiko.
Japanese Buzzard	1, likewise.
Black Kite	11, seen from the bullet train.
Latham's Snipe	1, territorial next to Sawa Hotel (scarce in S Honshū).
Oriental Turtle Dove	2, seen from the bullet train.
Eurasian Collared Dove	3, likewise.
White-bellied Green Pigeon	2, Mt. Mitutouge, close views.
Lesser Cuckoo	2, Mt. Mitutouge, actively calling.
House Swift	1, Narita T2.
Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker	1, Mt. Mitutouge.
Great Spotted Woodpecker	2, Mt. Mitutouge.
Grey Wagtail	1, Mt. Mitutouge.
Black-backed Wagtail	1, seen from the bullet train.
Japanese Wagtail	3, Kawaguchiko and other railway stations.

Japanese Thrush	3, Mt. Mitutouge, nice views.
Brown-headed Thrush	1, Mt. Mitutouge.
Asian Rock Thrush	1, seen from the bullet train.
Blue-and-white Flycatcher	8, Mt. Mitutouge, common.
Narcissus Flycatcher	5, Mt. Mitutouge.
Bull-headed Shrike	1, in a garden behind Sawa Hotel, Kawaguchiko.
Coal Tit	4, Mt. Mitutouge.
Varied Tit	3, Mt. Mitutouge.
Willow Tit	30, Mt. Mitutouge.
Japanese Tit	8, Mt. Mitutouge.
Long-tailed Tit	5, Mt. Mitutouge.
Goldcrest	1, Mt. Mitutouge.
Eurasian Nuthatch	3, Mt. Mitutouge.
Japanese Bush Warbler	1, Mt. Mitutouge.
Asian Stubtail	4, Mt. Mitutouge, including juveniles.
Japanese Leaf Warbler	3, territorial males at Mt. Mitutouge.
Eurasian Wren	10, minimum, Mt. Mitutouge.
White-cheeked Starling	4, seen from the bullet train, in Tokyo.
Red-billed Leiothrix	1, Mt. Mitutouge.
Brown-eared Bulbul	10, Mt. Mitutouge, also from the train.
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	10, about, at railway stations.
Oriental Greenfinch	4, at Sawa Hotel, Kawaguchiko.
Japanese Grosbeak	1, Mt. Mitutouge.
Eurasian Jay	8, Mt. Mitutouge.
Azure-winged Magpie	1, seen from the bullet train, in Tokyo.
Eurasian Magpie	1, likewise.
Eastern Carrion Crow	2, likewise.
Large-billed Crow	40, likewise, also in Kawaguchiko.

The **Japanese Leaf Warblers** were at 35.556569, 138.793588 (soon after leaving the road 708, to Misaka-michi), at 35.552325, 138.793295 (some distance beyond the carpark) and at 35.548973, 138.793337 (further up). All the birds were singing males, in conifers. The **Japanese Night Heron** was at the forest stream just above the first location. There are many such streams in the general area. In Google Maps images, the habitats appear rather open and barren, if compared to the reality of thick and, in places, abundant vegetation. The majority of large trees may be conifers, but it is really a mixed forest with many broad-leaved trees and oftentimes lush undergrowth.



Fig. 8. The lush forest of Mt. Mitutouge, along one of its many streams.



Fig. 9. Mt. Mitutouge trailhead access road, close to the site with key target species.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Visiting a popular tourist area like Mt. Fuji is not really a low budget choice, as the prices included in this report show. It was, however, not possible to stay at the railway station business hotels, usually the best deal, and commute from the nearest cities to Mt. Fuji area and back. The railway timetables did not allow this, if one desired to be in the right place at the right time, starting the birding before other people arrived and when the birds are most active.

On the other hand, a trip such as this is not very expensive either, especially if some of the costs may be shared with fellow birders. I would also have saved money by returning to Kawaguchiko by a bus, instead of a taxi. Well, I could even have gone to Mt. Mitutouge late in the afternoon, by a bus, and spent the short July night there, without sleeping, in the company of **Japanese Night Herons**, perhaps. It is not necessary to sleep each and every night, after all! Spending the night at a hostel, in a dormitory, on the other hand, would not have been a good choice, for obvious reasons.

After having been so lucky with my first, and especially the second (unexpected) target species, I did not think about the costs too much. **Japanese Night Herons** are very difficult to locate, even though they are occasionally recorded at a number of Honshu lower mountain sites, such as Karuizawa. Money well spent, I would say, whenever one visits Japan. As a person who is in love with the country, I may be slightly biased, though. Nevertheless, I hope your visit to Mt. Mitutouge will be an equally satisfactory one, whatever your targets and expectations may be!



Fig. 10. Mt. Mitutouge is good for Japanese forest species, such as **Varied Tit**.