

Last minute Japan

Neil Alford

On Monday 20th February 2006, I was sitting in the Dun Cow pub at Salthouse, Norfolk, bemoaning the seemingly birdless British winter and thinking that I needed to get away somewhere different to see a few new birds. Six days later, I was standing in Kushiro, Hokkaido – Japan! Armed only with a borrowed copy of Mark Brazil's 20 year-old *A Birdwatchers Guide to Japan*, a few recent trip reports gleaned from the internet and a useful 'point and speak' Japanese phrasebook, I set off into the bitterly cold snow-covered terrain. I was in search of some of the Japanese winter specialities, such as Steller's Sea Eagle, Blakiston's Fish Owl and Japanese Crane, to mention just three.

Several challenges became immediately obvious: English is hardly spoken or understood, I had only managed to book a couple of nights' accommodation ahead of arrival and, unless you can take raw scallops and sea urchins in your stride, food can be an issue for the faint-hearted. The weather was cold with frequent snow showers, but the roads were kept clear

and travelling was aided by the satellite navigation provided by the Nissan car rental company (although the Japanese voice instructions were rather less handy).

I made my way across from Kushiro to Nemuro via the coastal headlands, and the journey provided my first stunning views of Steller's Sea Eagles, a family party of Japanese Cranes, a flock of Rosy Finches and several species of auk. There were also good numbers of ducks, including Black Scoters and Harlequin Ducks, to peruse.

I had arranged to stay at Minshuku Furen, where the owner, Takeyoshi Matsuo, speaks English and is knowledgeable about birds. I had hoped he might provide details for my most wanted target bird – Blakiston's Fish Owl – but he was away during the period I was staying at the lodge. Although I tried for the owl at the well-known Hattaushi Bridge at dawn and dusk for two days, I only heard them calling at dusk and failed to see any. I was going to have to rely on a site further north, at Rausu.

Plate 1. Adult Steller's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus*, Rausu, Hokkaido, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford). Discarded remnants of seafood are a magnet for these magnificent eagles ... and their attendant photographers.





Plate 2. Adult White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*, Rausu, Hokkaido, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford). Of about 100 eagles encountered out on the sea-ice, half were White-tailed Eagles of various ages.

Rausu is the Japanese version of Ireland's famous Killybegs, but without the Guinness! It is a busy fishing port and so holds plenty of gulls, but it also attracts good numbers of fish-eating eagles. Steller's Sea Eagles and White-tailed Eagles are all over the place. When I arrived, some Japanese photographers had hired a boat and towed a lump of pack ice into the inner harbour alongside the fish quay; they were throwing fish heads onto the ice, which soon became fully occupied with eagles! When the photographers wanted closer views, they merely pulled the ice closer. This provided me with my first inkling that birding in Japan was not about twitching at all; it was about getting the perfect photograph! The harbour also holds good numbers of Harlequin Ducks, Black Scoters and Long-tailed Ducks, but it is the number of gulls here that is more significant. Slaty-backed, Glaucous and Glaucous-winged Gulls are everywhere, while the occasional Kamchatka, Vega and Black-headed Gull also makes a showing.

Most importantly for me, there is a reliable site to obtain excellent views of Blakiston's Fish Owl near Rausu. Just outside the town is Minshuku Washi-no-yado, where one could book to stay, but English is not understood. I had been told by e-mail that they were fully booked, but they are very accommodating and it is worth

trying to overcome the language difficulty as this is definitely the best place to stay. The property is set up alongside the river and the owners have floodlit the area to facilitate photography. Here, photographers (mostly Japanese) use wireless remotes and stroboscopic flash to capture images of the owls coming down to the river to feed. The proximity also allows for birders to view from the upstairs rooms of the minshuku, which overlook the river. In fact, if you play your cards right and stay there, you could sit in bed and watch the owls fishing. I spent two nights watching until 2.00am, and then on my third night I stayed until 4.30am. In total, I saw the owls visiting eight times, and each time they came down to feed there were so many flash-guns going off that it was like a night at the Oscars!

In order to photograph the owls, you need to be in a car and in position from 7.00pm and, as the car windows need to be open, the experience is a bitterly cold one. While I was there, it was difficult to secure a suitable place to see the owls, as seriously well-equipped photographers come from all over Japan to take shots and there are limited places to park the car. With a maximum capacity of about a dozen cars on site, British twitchers come very low in the pecking order here!



Plate 3. Rausu Harbour, Hokkaido, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford).
Situated in the northeastern coast of Hokkaido, this busy fishing port attracts large numbers of gulls and sea eagles. Depending on the weather conditions, the sea around the harbour may be frozen solid.

Plate 4. Steller's Sea Eagles *Haliaeetus pelagicus*, Rausu, Hokkaido, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford).
After sailing for three-quarters of an hour at dawn, we reached the sea-ice about 10 miles north of Rausu. Here, with the Russian Kurile Islands behind, Steller's Sea Eagles await their breakfast.





Plate 5. Immature Steller's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus*, Rausu, Hokkaido, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford). These eagles feed and roost around the port. As well as the eagles, there are also plenty of gulls and corvids (mostly Large-billed Crows *Corvus macrorhynchos*) scavenging in the harbour.

Plate 6. Adult Steller's Sea Eagles *Haliaeetus pelagicus* and White-tailed Eagles *H. albicilla*, Rausu, Hokkaido, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford). This block of sea-ice was tethered to a line and baited for eagles; it could be dragged closer to the attendant boatful of Japanese photographers or, if too close for the big lenses, it was simply allowed to drift further away.





Plate 7. Minshuku Washi-no-yado, Rausu, Hokkaido, Japan, March 2006 (*Neil Alford*). Just north of Rausu, this is the site to see Blakiston's Fish Owl. Once dark, birds come in from their daytime roost on the wooded slopes and perch in the saplings on the opposite bank of the river. They can be seen from the carpark, or even from the rooms, by floodlight.

Plate 8. Blakiston's Fish Owl *Ketupa blakistoni*, Minshuku Washi-no-yado, Rausu, Hokkaido, Japan, March 2006 (*Neil Alford*). This individual has just arrived and is checking out the fare. Small gravel 'basins' are created in the river each day and stocked with fish; the photographers then position themselves for the best action shots. Feeding time is like Oscar night!





Plate 9. Adult Steller's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus*, Rausu, Hokkaido, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford).

Plate 10. First-winter Kamchatka Gull *Larus canus kamtschatschensis*, Rausu, Hokkaido, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford). Note the heavy brown blotching on the body and underwing-coverts, the contrastingly streaked head and the dark-tipped, pink bill. Some Kamchatka Gulls are so distinctive that it is easy to see why some authorities advocate that this form should be split from Common Gull.





Plate 11. Black-eared Kite *Milvus migrans lineatus*, Kushiro, Hokkaido, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford). This eastern counterpart of Black Kite loiters with White-tailed Eagles at the crane reserve, looking for easy pickings.

Plate 12. Japanese Cranes *Grus japonensis*, Kushiro, Hokkaido, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford). About 90% of the Japanese population of this handsome crane breed in the Kushiro-Nemuro districts of SE Hokkaido, and in winter they congregate on the reserves where feeding is provided. As spring approaches, they begin to dance.





Plate 13. Male Ryukyu Robin *Erithacus komadori*, Yamburu, Okinawa, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford). Ryukyu Robins are generally elusive birds best looked for early in the morning, but a pair showed well during the day at one of the Okinawa Rail clearings which I came across. Pale Thrushes were here too.

Plate 14. Amami Woodcock *Scolopax mira*, Yamburu, Okinawa, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford). Although found just by driving around the forest roads at night, these birds were usually difficult to photograph (or even see well enough to eliminate Eurasian Woodcock) because of the difficulty in manoeuvring a car on the narrow, vegetation-encroached, roads. The populations of Amami Woodcock and Amami Thrush on the island of Amami have recently been decimated by the introduction of mongooses to control the Habu, the highly venomous indigenous snake.





Plate 15. Yambaru, Okinawa, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford).

The discovery of this colourful endemic rail (first described to science as recently as 1981) was a real surprise. The main coastal route around the NE side of Okinawa is the place to see it. I saw my first Okinawa Rail at the roadside just around the corner from the road-sign indicating that drivers should take care not to squash them.

Plate 16. Adult Okinawa Rail *Rallus okinawae*, Yamburu, Okinawa, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford).

Although apparently not scarce in the evergreen forests of the northern quarter of the island, seeing an Okinawa Rail is not guaranteed. Early morning watching at damp clearings in the rank roadside vegetation seems to pay off well though. Note the tyre tracks of my vehicle in this shot. I did not run over any rails, I hasten to say!





Plate 17. Adult Steller's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus*, Rausu, Hokkaido, Japan, March 2006 (Neil Alford). Rausu is the gateway to the largest readily accessible winter concentration of Steller's Sea Eagles in the world; more than 2,000 (over 90% of Japan's wintering population) gather here on the Shiretoko Peninsula.

Following my final all-night owl vigil, I left just in time to catch a boat leaving Rausu at 5.00am to go out and find the pack ice. The boat was full of the ubiquitous Japanese photographers, but well worth the effort: over 100 White-tailed and Steller's Sea Eagles were observed at close range, rendering the freezing cold and lack of sleep insignificant.

Most of the local rivers in the area held a pair of Brown Dippers, while woodpeckers were much in evidence: I saw Great Spotted, White-backed and Japanese Pygmy. After a few great days in Rausu, I made my way back via the headlands and again saw good-sized flocks of Rosy Finches before making for the famous Japanese Crane site near Kushiro.

The crane site is similar in set-up to Slimbridge WWT Reserve in Gloucestershire, with a plush observation lounge and shops, but again with large numbers of photographers – mostly armed with Canon 500mm and 600mm lenses.

The Japanese Cranes are fed on the snow-covered meadow in front of the centre, and provided a fine, if somewhat artificial, spectacle. White-tailed Eagles and Black-eared Kites add to the entertainment by buzzing the cranes for food scraps. After watching the cranes leave for their roost site, I made my way to Kushiro airport and then caught an 11.30am flight the next day, via Tokyo, to my next destination – Okinawa.

It took several hours to reach Okinawa and the immediate difference was the weather; this is a warm and humid subtropical island at the other end of Japan. Having arrived in the late afternoon and sorted out my car rental, I decided to make my way up to the northern, forested part of the island called the Yamburu, where the specialities occur. I arrived at Fungawa Dam at 8.30pm; this was a good place to begin my search for Okinawa Rail, Amami Woodcock, Ryukyu Scops Owl, Ryukyu Robin, Ryukyu Minivet and Pryer's Woodpecker.

I had reviewed several birders' strategies mentioned in trip reports for seeing the rail and woodcock. As far as the rail was concerned, the strategies ranged from driving around at night with a flashlight directed towards the trees alongside the tracks (in the hope of seeing one roosting), to locating a rail by call then getting into the habitat with a flashlight and searching the trees. One report mentioned a rail being located roosting in a tree about three metres off the ground, and the bird was apparently not bothered about birders crashing about in the undergrowth or the use of the light. I decided to adopt the 'find one calling' approach, even though getting into the habitat appeared likely to be difficult in the extreme due to weather conditions. However, after having driven more than 200km around forest tracks in heavy rain with the car windows wide open for nine hours, I had not heard a single Okinawa Rail! What I had seen was Amami Woodcock and both Ryukyu Scops Owl and Brown Hawk Owl (I also heard many of each of the owls). By dawn, I was feeling a little discouraged, especially as I realised I would need to adopt exactly the same approach again at dusk. As I pondered the problem, I also wondered if I would ever find time to sleep, or indeed eat, as the only stores were on the other side of the island.

I made my way across to Fungawa Dam, which I understood to be a reliable site for Pryer's Woodpecker before 7.00am. En route, I left the forest track and drove towards the main road around the north end of the island. I had no sooner turned onto the road when I suddenly saw an Okinawa Rail adjacent to thick lush undergrowth along the edge of the road. Hardly believing my luck, I managed to achieve good views before it showed me its back end (a frequent sight with these rails, I was to discover) and skulked off into dense cover. Concentrating on a 6km stretch of the road leading towards the dam, I eventually managed to see 10 Okinawa Rails over my three days here, and photograph four of them.

In fact, there are two off-road rail sites here (within 1km of each other) where a bit of a clearing in the vegetation enables good viewing conditions. The time of my Okinawa Rails sightings mostly ranged between dawn and 8.00am (but I also saw one out and about at 10.00am), and then again from 3.30pm until dusk.

Pryer's Woodpeckers, it turned out, were indeed reliable around Fungawa Dam prior to 7.00am (and were located by their persistent drumming), while I also located another pair some way north of there.

During my evening forest drives, I managed five sightings of Amami Woodcocks, even though the species is meant to be extremely rare and Eurasian Woodcocks can cause confusion. Several Ryukyu Robins were active at dawn, but only showed briefly near the track edge before diving back for cover, although a pair did show well during the day at one of the rail clearings. Ryukyu Minivets were also quite common. I also saw Blue Rock Thrush, while Grey-faced Buzzard, Osprey and Japanese Sparrowhawk were widespread.

Further south on Okinawa, near Kin, were some rice paddies holding Long-billed, Pacific Golden and Little Ringed Plovers, as well as a few Long-toed Stints. Various snipe put in a showing, but nailing their true identity was hampered because access into the paddies was not welcomed by the field-workers. Also, as well as Eastern Marsh Harrier and Kingfisher, I saw many Black-backed Wagtails and Chinese Bulbuls. There were no Saunder's Gulls at the site I had for them near the airport, but I was rewarded with four Black-faced Spoonbills on this, the only bit of mud I saw on Okinawa.

My trip finally ended back at Tokyo's Narita international airport. Andrew Bloomfield had mentioned it was worth staying at the ANA airport hotel here, as a river passes by the front of the hotel and he had seen some interesting birds on his recent trip. Following this advice, I spent three hours following the river downstream and saw half-a-dozen Bull-headed Shrikes, 18 Siberian Meadow Buntings, 40 Dusky Thrushes, 28 Rustic and 15 Black-faced Buntings, Oriental Greenfinch, Japanese Wagtail and large flocks of White-cheeked Starlings.

I did not see a single other birder on my trip and, other than near the US airbase on Okinawa, there were generally very few Europeans around. I found the Japanese people to be very helpful and courteous. I managed my food requirements by seeking out places where I could choose what I wanted rather than having prepared meals without choice. In fact, if one is really desperate to avoid Japanese fare, there were '7/11-type' retail outlets all over the place, enabling the purchase of recognisable sustenance. I used Virgin air miles to fly to Tokyo and the good value ANA air-passes cut the price of the internal flights to just £240 in total. The rest of the trip cost about £1,000, which I considered well worth it for such an enjoyable birding experience.

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