Amami-Oshima and Okinawa
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Introduction
After three weeks working in Taiwan (JHS, ADY) and Japan (SB) we decided to take a birding holiday in Amami and Okinawa. We met in Amami on the afternoon of June 4th. Flights were much cheaper and offered more flexibility from Tokyo but JHS and ADY managed to connect through from Taipei. SB flew from Tokyo Narita on Vanilla Air (US $105). ADY flew the night of the 3rd to Okinawa on Peach and returned via Tiger Air. JHS flew from Taipei on the 4th on Eva, and met ADY in Okinawa where they connected to Amami on Japan Airlines. From Taiwan it cost ~US $800. SB arrived on Amami first and picked up our rental car from Times Rental. There were no surprises and SB had the car and was waiting at the airport for us when we arrived about 45 minutes after him. We also rented from Times on Okinawa and it went smoothly. Booking was done online. Cost was about US $160 on Amami for 2 days and $190 on Okinawa for 3 days. We took the full insurance package so it could be cheaper if you want to gamble a bit. We used a small car on both islands. A high clearance vehicle would have been beneficial on Amami but was not critical. Okinawa roads were all paved. One road on Amami was very rough but we found a smoother route that can avoid this assuming you encounter no surprises like landslides. We encountered two roads closed by recent landslides on Amami so flexibility and early starts are critical to avoid disappointment. Note that our weather for the trip was exceptional with sun all days and heavy rain the night before we looked for Okinawa Rails. All bird data were recorded on eBird and are publicly available.

Amami

Figure 1. Overview of sites visited on Amami. Generated from eBird for sites where we observed Lidth’s Jays (virtually all sites visited had this species).
Figure 2. Map of Mount Yuwan area. We took the road up from the village office in Uken after finding the eastern access road blocked by a landslide. The key intersection marked is discussed in the text and had Amami Thrush, Ryukyu Robin, Ryukyu Scops-Owl, Lidth’s Jays and others. Amami Woodcock were seen just to the north of this and also along the Mount Yuwan road near the trailhead.
Figure 3. Amami Virgin Forest (also known as Kinsakubaru Forest Trail and Supa-rindo road). We traveled the very slow rough road and took 1.5 hours to travel about 10km. We later discovered the nice paved road that would have meant a 15-20 minute drive.

Figure 4. Amami Nature Forest area. The large flag is the eBird hotspot for the site (near the parking lot). The small flag to the northeast is the hilltop observation tower. The other flag is just an incidental observation we made.
June 4
We first drove to our hotel and checked in (Amami Tower Hotel – comfortable, non-smoking room, non-smoking restaurant, smoky hallways; booked online; small but comfortable rooms; US $40 per person per night). Many people who try for Amami Woodcock in the north end of the island have reported disappointments. We thus chose to drive straight to an area near Mount Yuwan in the south end of the island and try there. A landslide had closed the first road that we tried but there was fortunately a second option. We arrived with a couple hours of light left in the day and immediately found Ruddy Kingfisher, and the first of many Lidth’s Jays and Ryukyu Robins. Note that the latter are vocally, morphologically and behaviourally different from the Okinawa birds. The Okinawa birds are remarkably easy to see with birds sitting on the road everywhere we went. The Amami birds are skulkers and we had to work to get good views of a couple individuals. We had our first views of Amami Thrush at a road intersection at 28.3052875, 129.3259907. This is a key intersection and had Lidth’s Jays, Ryukyu Robins, White-backed Woodpecker and produced our first looks at Ryukyu Scops-Owls in the twilight. As soon as it was dark we headed north and had our first Amami Woodcock flush off the road within seconds. Less than 2 minutes later we had crippling views of another Amami Woodcock on the road and Sander and Andrew got some great photos (at 28.3094437, 129.3265915). We ended up with 5 Amami Woodcock for the night (one hour of looking – 3 other birds in the vicinity of the Mount Yuwan trailhead at 28.2973525, 129.3175793), 4 Amami Rabbits (*Pentalagus furnessi;* 3 near the Mount Yuwan trailhead), several Ryukyu Long-tailed Giant Rats (*Diplothrix legata*), a variety of frogs including the endemic Otten Frog (*Babina subaspera*) and Amami Oshima Frog (*Odorrana splendida*), and *Dinodon semicarinatum*, the Ryukyu Odd-tooth Snake. We would have been in bed by 10pm but the route we took home was cut off by another landslide and we had to backtrack for 30+ minutes. Take careful note of your turns as the island is a labyrinth of tracks. At any rate, we ended up in bed by 11pm, much more comfortable than reported in many trip reports.

June 5
We were up at 4am and drove 1.5 hours to our next birding site in the north (the famous ‘Virgin Forest’, aka Supa-rindo road from many trip reports). We chose the closest, most direct access road (from Naze at 28.395723, 129.489524) and it turned out to be a bad decision, taking us about 40 minutes longer than anticipated. If you take this route, look for Northern Boobook at 28.362827, 129.473254. We recommend the paved road from further west at 28.378785, 129.44874. This road goes up the mountain to an intersection at 28.349292, 129.449845. Turn right (west) at the intersection and you arrive at the trail we used in less than 1 km. We did not mark the trailhead (left side of the road) but the first coordinates we took on the track were at 28.340915, 129.447118. Note that although the track is drivable (rough), we recommend walking it. The track is not on Google Maps at this time. We arrived at the track at 5:30am, about 30 minutes after first light. We walked roughly 5 km (round trip) on this rough road to 28.336108, 129.452509 between 5:30 and 10am. The road changes to bitumen approximately where we turned around – this...
good paved road is also not on Google Maps but would clearly provide another good access point if you can figure out how to get to this end. Birding along this track was great with excellent views of two different Amami Thrushes. Note that if you do not stumble across this bird on a roadside, just listen for their high-pitched contact call (somewhat similar to Ryukyu Robin contact call) and walk quietly into the forest. They are fairly easy to track down if they are not on a 60 degree slope. Another highlight on this track was finding two different Ryukyu Flycatchers. This may be the most difficult target species to find on Amami and Okinawa. Listen for the song and track it down. The first one was down in a gully off the trail (28.336108, 129.452509). The second was obliging by being directly over the road (28.331435, 129.462195). Other target birds along this track included many Ryukyu Whistling Green-Pigeons, Ruddy Kingfishers, Lidth’s Jays, White-backed Woodpeckers, Ryukyu Minivets, Ryukyu Robins, Varied Tits and a pair of Japanese Paradise-Flycatchers.

In the afternoon, we wandered up to the Amami Nature Forest (28.4521227, 129.5927063) to do some scouting. Andrew got great views of an Amami Woodcock in the middle of the trail just east of the parking area in full daylight. It’s amazing how easy birds can be once you have the first one in the bag.

**June 6**
We returned to the area at first light on June 6th and spent three hours on the lookout tower at 28.454732, 129.594447 looking at hilltopping insects and enjoying the views and birds. We had many Ryukyu Whistling Green-Pigeons, Ruddy Kingfishers (good views), White-backed Woodpeckers, Ryukyu Minivets, Lidth’s Jays, and Ryukyu Robins without moving an inch. We also got a good look at an Okinawa Tree Lizard (*Japalura polygonata*) as it climbed a small tree at the base of the tower. We spent some time to get good looks at Ryukyu Robins in this area, as they were more accessible than in other locations (no steep slopes).

We departed Amami at 14:00. You only need to be at the airport 20-30 minutes in advance of any domestic flight as it is a tiny airport.
We landed in Okinawa at 15:15 on June 6th and had our rental car and were under way by 16:00. We spotted 3 Black-faced Spoonbills from the highway so stopped to view them from a bridge (26.194956,127.687677). On the way back to the airport on June 9th we stopped at Manko Waterfowl and Wetland Center and saw 4 Black-
faced Spoonbills as well as a few waders – 26.1939339,127.6818824). We walked out onto the bridge over the wetland to view them as the light and views were better there than from the wetland trail. A Cinnamon Bittern flew over the road at 26.197675,127.713107 as we drove out of the city on our first day. There are presumably wetlands near here that would be good for viewing this species. Our only other stop en route to our hotel was on the bridge to Kouri Island from Yagaji Island (26.690698,128.019477). Here we enjoyed great views of Roseate and Black-naped Terns. Sander found us a great place to stay on booking.com (Ayano Sou - 26.63029,128.063703). It had simple rooms with up to 4 futons on the floor and no wifi and was entirely non-smoking, had a small associated restaurant and only cost US $120 for 3 nights for all three of us (shared room). The owner/manager had not left notice that we were coming but a nice restaurant patron who spoke some English called him and he left his drinking festivities to come collect our money and give us a key (we could not find a lock for the door so we never figured out what the key was for). The event was more amusing than upsetting as we had dinner while we waited and were not in a hurry as it was evening. If you decide to stay here we advise that you do not arrive late as this seemed to be par for the course.

**June 7 and 8**

Although a couple of trip reports mentioned that it was hard to find Okinawa Rails and Okinawa Woodpeckers we had no difficulty (recording 69 rails and 22 woodpeckers in our 2 full days of birding). We had spectacular views of most of the rails and about one third of the woodpeckers. The easiest place to start is at the junction of Highway 2 and a small mountain road (26.761156, 128.257265). We had already seen several rails along Highway 2 as we drove in and in total saw 53 rails on this first (and most intensive) day of birding (most in the first 3 hours of daylight). It had rained during the night so activity was fever-pitched from first light (5am) until about 8:30am. The time of year and weather were clearly perfect for observing rails. The second morning we made no effort to look for rails but JHS saw over a dozen as he drove to the first birding site. The second morning followed 24 hours of dry conditions and it was sunny and clear in the morning. Despite this, there were obviously lots of rails active. Note that they disappeared after about 9am both days and were less conspicuous in the evenings and not visible at night. Focus your efforts on the very early morning for this and all birds.

Okinawa Woodpeckers were easy to hear at many sites (drumming and calling) but required some luck to see. We ended up seeing 6 or 7 individuals and had stellar views of colour-banded birds at a nest site we discovered (26.769429,128.265674). I don’t know if they use the nest site from year to year but this site had lovely habitat and would be a good place to look at any rate.

We spent one evening owling and had several Northern Boobooks around Ada townsite (one at 26.744079,128.314478 for example). We also had excellent views of Ryukyu flying foxes (*Pteropus dasymallus*) in Ada. Ryukyu Scops-Owls were everywhere we stopped at night. Japanese Scops-Owls proved to be a problem and we dipped on this species. We visited a couple of sites provided in trip reports (Ada
and the JAL resort in Kunigami). The latter site had at least 3 calling Ruddy-breasted Crakes but little else. The day after we left, a report popped up on eBird of two Japanese Scops-Owls at Aha Dam Carpark (26.710296,128.268268). This site has a few records and would be worth checking.

Japanese Wood-pigeon is clearly a tough bird on these islands and seems to be picked up rather randomly. JHS went to one of the best viewpoints on the island at first light on June 8th: a bridge over pristine forest at 26.708408,128.19692. At 6:10am, 4 Japanese Wood-pigeons flew over the bridge heading west. Other birds of interest seen and heard from the bridge in 2 hours of watching included Japanese Sparrowhawk, Okinawa Rails, Ryukyu Whistling Green-Pigeon, Ryukyu Scops-Owls, Ruddy Kingfishers, Pygmy Woodpeckers, Okinawa Woodpeckers (5), Ryukyu Minivet, Varied Tit and Ryukyu Robins. Access to this site is possible from many directions but fastest from 26.730794, 128.169358 (if you are coming from the Kunigami area). SB saw a two Japanese Wood-pigeons in flight on June 7th at 26.736019,128.230131. Another exceptional viewing site to try for this species is on a hilltop with microwave towers at 26.751293,128.242839. The vista is at the coordinates given (south of the towers by about 250m). For entomologists, this hilltop could be exceptional for finding interesting flies, wasps and other landmark driven species.

We found few trails for hiking on the island but there were some nice unmarked ones at 26.736019,128.230131. The mountain roads are very quiet so walking there was great. If you want more chances to see snakes, amphibians, insects, etc, trails are the best. We saw 3 Ryukyu Green Snakes (*Cyclophiops semicarinatus*), 1 Okinawa Pitviper (or Himahbu – *Ovophis okinavensis*), several Sword-tail Newts (*Cynops ensicauda*) and lots of insects on the trails at 26.736019,128.230131.

We flew out at 8:30am on June 9th so had time for only a brief birding stop (to look at the Spoonbills) on our way to the airport.

**Photos of some of the highlights of our visit**

Figure 7. View from the canopy tower at the Amami Nature Forest (28.454732, 129.594447). Photo JHS.
Figure 8. Amami Woodcock near Mount Yuwan, Amami (at 28.3094437, 129.3265915). Photo SB.

Figure 9. Otton Frog (*Babina subaspera*) near Mount Yuwan, Amami. Photo ADY.
Figure 10. Amami Oshima Frog (*Odorrana splendida*) near Mount Yuwan, Amami. Photo ADY.

Figure 11. Ryukyu Odd-tooth Snake (*Dinodon semicarinatum*) near Mount Yuwan, Amami. Photo ADY.
Figure 12. Lidth’s Jay, ‘Virgin Forest’, Amami. Photo SB.

Figure 13. Ryukyu Flycatcher, ‘Virgin Forest’, Amami. Photo SB.
Figure 14. Ryukyu Robin, Okinawa. Photo SB.

Figure 15. Okinawa Rail, Okinawa. Photo SB.
Figure 16. Okinawa Woodpecker (adorned with colour bands), Okinawa. Photo SB.

Figure 17. One of several Sword-tail Newts (*Cynops ensicauda*) found along trail originating at 26.736019,128.230131 (Okinawa).
Figure 18. Okinawa Pitviper (*Ovophis okinavensis*) found along the trail at 26.736019, 128.230131 (Okinawa).

Figure 19. Northern Boobook, Ada Village, Okinawa. Photo SB.
Figure 20. Black-faced Spoonbills, Okinawa. Photo SB.

Figure 21. Two of the many spectacular hover flies encountered on the trip. On the left is a species of *Milesia*, on the right is a *Mallota* species. Photos SB.