



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 11/2015

KARUIZAWA, JAPAN, IN JULY 2015

Petri Hottola (phottola@gmail.com)

In July 2015, 11th to 13th July, I had a stop-over in Japan, between JAL flights from Manila, the Philippines, to Los Angeles, the USA. The time was spent in search for a missing world list species, the **Yellow Bunting**. The chosen location was Karuizawa, in Nagano Prefecture, Central Honshu. I traveled there straight after arrival in Narita, Tokyo, and returned to catch my cross-Pacific flight to California. A schedule such as this would not be possible in many nations, but is quite feasible in Japan, which is known for its reliable, punctual services. The local travels were made by high-speed and local trains, by taxis and walking. The birding was mainly focused on Yacho no Mori forest sanctuary in Karuizawa, where I spent a full birdwatching day (12th July). Some additional records were made in Naka-Karuizawa, at railway stations and through the windows of the trains.



Fig. 1. Welcome to the Karuizawa Wild Bird Sanctuary (Yacho no Mori)! For us northern people, who have barely left the forest and entered the civilization, the leaves of the forest do still talk.

I scored with my target species and also made a number of other nice observations. The following report is going to describe the mid-summer visit to Karuizawa, for the inspiration of others with similar interests. Birders normally visit the area earlier in season and it may therefore be useful to know how the place was in mid-July. The information on birding and travel in Japan is also sometimes difficult to locate, especially for those who do not understand Japanese. By providing this information, I am also attempting to keep the good things circulating. I am, after all, personally in debt to fellow birders who kindly gave their advice for this trip, Yann Muzika and Chris Cooper in particular.

ACCOMMODATION

After a lot of pondering, I decided to stay at Bells Cabin, a guesthouse in Naka-Karuizawa, about 1.8 km south of the Yacho no Mori protected forest, as a pedestrian walks. In retrospect, this was a sound decision. A double room cost 10.000 yen (€76), without breakfast. The shared toilets and showers were on both floors, the more spacious ones being downstairs, next to a small dining area. Hot chocolate was pretty expensive, 550 yen (€3.85) per cup. Karuizawa is not only expensive but also popular in summer. Early bookings are therefore advised for July-August, when the urban people of the plains enjoy the relatively cool weather of the hills. I arrived on the day of a mid-summer festival, in the middle of fireworks signaling the start of the high tourist season. In the second evening, the evening was silent and a **Japanese Hawk Owl** was calling close by.

At the fully-booked guesthouse, I got the largest double room and shared the place first with some students, and then tourists like me, for example with a family from Hong Kong. It was interesting to explain them our Nordic system of six to eight weeks of paid holidays, annually, and the benefits of having strong labor unions to look after people's rights. It is after all, not that common. Even some Western democracies, such as the United States, have not developed such a degree of organization, to the benefit of the whole society.

TRANSPORTATION

In regard to Karuizawa, there are two transportation problems to be solved. First: How to get there from one's arrival gateway, in my case the Narita International Airport. Second: One needs to figure out how to move around locally. Karuizawa is a large area and can be approached either by a rental car or by public transportation. In the forest itself, walking is the only option. As already mentioned, my decision was to rely on public transportation, trains and taxis. In the following paragraphs, I am going to explain how I did the transits.

Narita – Naka-Karuizawa – Narita

On the JAL flight from Manila, I had enjoyed the good food, kiwi juice and plum wine. After arrival, and after the polite and efficient immigration formalities in Narita, I walked straight to the Keisei ticket counter at the arrivals hall, at 15.55. A one-way ticket to Ueno station (2.470 yen, €18) was bought, on board of Keisei Skyliner (reserved seats, Narita Sky Access), the fastest connection to central Tokyo. It had not been possible to purchase the tickets in the Internet, because I had been on the road in no-Internet locations for a month and one is not allowed to make a reservation earlier.

Afterwards, I walked to the right and took an elevator to a lower level, visiting a JR ticket office for Hokuriku Shinkansen (the super-fast train) tickets. After an explanation, one of the two young women at the counter realized that my plans agreed with Kanto Area Railway Pass regulations, a way to purchase the shinkansen rides for a reduced price of 8.300 yen (€61). What is more, I could buy a return ticket already there. The end result: a happy customer and two happy JR ladies.

Elated by the fact that I already held three out of the six train tickets in my hand, I went to the Skyliner platform, entering the fast train after a cold drink or two. It was hot and humid in Tokyo, as usual in summer, and any exercise such as dragging two heavy bags made one sweaty and thirsty. On board the Skyliner, it was cool and comfortable and I immediately felt relaxed. Birds could be observed through the large windows, common species such as **Eastern Spotbilled Ducks**.



Fig. 2. It is comfortable on board Keisei Skyliner, between Narita Airport and Ueno Station.

At Keisei Ueno Station, one needs to leave the building and walk 100 meters to the left, across a street and into the JR Ueno station, for the Hokuriku Shinkansen. Before doing so, I spent some time in a Ueno Station bakery, shopping food for the evening and for the next day in the forest, too. Drinks could be bought anywhere, but fresh pastries, slices of pizza and buns were not for sale in other places along my route, and I had no time to look for them, either. Stock yourself whenever it is conveniently possible!

At the JR Ueno station, I did not know how to proceed to the shinkansen platforms. Once the right direction was explained to me at an information counter, I walked there, to find a row of automatic gates. What to do now? I had my prepaid tickets but they did not fit into those machines. Being in a hurry, I forced myself through the gate and was not stopped by anybody doing so, even though the Japanese passengers gave me some disapproving looks. Just before the platform, I was stopped and asked to show my ticket, which was in a see-through plastic bag, which hung around my neck.

The one hour train journey was a comfortable one, in the most economical class on the train. The information tables were clear and enabled me to follow our route. It was not crowded and we

advanced at a steady, fast pace, through cities and rural areas. Sun was setting and after a while, it was not possible to watch the scenery anymore. I focused mentally on the last transit.

In Karuizawa, at 19.55, time was running fast during the 10 minute transit. I nevertheless managed to find a ticket counter, purchase a 230 yen ticket to Naka-Karuizawa, five minutes away, and take an elevator downstairs, managing to board the local train (Shibuya Line) just before it departed. In Naka-Karuizawa, an elevator took me to the first floor, where I showed the ticket, before taking another elevator back down, on the street-side of the building. As the elevator doors opened, I saw a taxi stand on the right.

On the return journey, I arrived at the Naka-Karuizawa station early, at 8.30. It would have been possible to transit to Karuizawa at once, but I preferred to sit on a trackside bench, enjoying the cool morning, the company of Japanese ladies next to me, and the birds around the station. The latter included two **Black Kites**, one **Oriental Honey Buzzard**, ten **Red-rumped Swallows** and a lone **White-cheeked Starling**. I took the next (9.00) Shibuya Line local train to Karuizawa, where I also had plenty of time to buy drinks and snacks, before having a breakfast on the main platform, which had great views over the surrounding countryside. Birds were recorded there: three **Japanese Buzzards**, one breeding **Black-backed Wagtail** and a colony of some 100 **Asian House Martins**.

Shinkansen trains kept on passing to both directions and my train, with a blue nose, arrived on time at 10.26. On the way back to Ueno Station (11.30), it was sunny all the way and I enjoyed the scenery, including a party of 20 **White-cheeked Starlings**. Everything was easy in Tokyo, in regard to the already familiar transit to Keisei Skyliner. I even found out the correct route at JR Ueno Station. At the row of automatic gates, people with train passes were expected to walk through an office next door, and show the pass there. The ride to Narita International Airport was equally easygoing. The best bird was an **Azure-winged Magpie**. I reached the JAL check early (13.30), and consequently had a relaxed departure to LAX. The plane took off at 17.25.



Fig. 3. Hokuriku Shinkansen arrives in Karuizawa, taking passengers to Tokyo in one hour.

Naka-Karuizawa Station – Bells Cabin – Yacho no Mori

It was a busy evening at Naka-Karuizawa, with a summer festival and big fireworks next to the railway station. My taxi did, nevertheless, arrive soon. The ride to Bells Cabin cost 700 yen (EUR 5.50), the minimum initial charge. Two days later, my return ride was 820 yen. The distance of 650 meters was too much for me, after a rather long day, and with two bags (35 kg) to drag, especially at night in an unfamiliar even though completely safe town. I was also in a hurry, in order to hit the bed as early as possible, to be well-rested the next morning, the big day at Yacho no Mori.

It was going to be long a day in the forest, with plenty of walking and standing on its trails. I therefore decided to do also the 1.8 km (uphill) early morning transit to the sanctuary by a taxi, requesting the taxi driver to reserve one for me. This was a decision I did not regret afterwards. I woke up at 4.30 (sunrise) to meet the second taxi driver at 4.55, five minutes before the agreed time. We arrived at the edge of the forest at 5.00, before anybody else had entered the trails. The charge was 1.260 yen (EUR 9, USD 10).

In the late afternoon, the air was like warm milk, completely calm and with clear sky. I therefore had no problem to walk the 1.8 km downhill from Hoshino back to Bells Cabin, greatly enjoying the beauty and peace of a Japanese suburb, and a few birds on the way. A female long-distance runner was practicing on the streets and she managed to meet me three times, while doing her circular route. Birdwise, the highlights of the walk were two records of **Grey Wagtails**, a **Eurasian Wren**, a singing **Bull-headed Shrike** and a party of three **Red-rumped Swallows**. Overall, I had spent 12.5 hours on foot, with a 20 minute break in the afternoon.



Fig. 4. This is the spot, where one's taxi should stop in the morning, a Y-crossing just beyond a bridge to the left, about 300 meters past the Picchio Visitor Centre. The Yacho no Mori protected forest starts here. The gravel track on the left follows the river, the 'Pond Trail' starts on the right.

YACHO NO MORI AND ITS BIRDS

Orientation



Fig. 5. As usual in Japan, the trails were well managed and well signposted.

I could not find a trail map in the Internet before arriving in Japan. Neither did Google Maps images help. Fortunately, the trails of Yacho no Mori were well signposted and there were trail maps (**Fig. 6**), too. I started on the Central Trail, from Yukawa River to Akagera Rest House, past Kibitaki Rest House. In the very beginning, there was a **Blue-and-white Flycatcher** territory (two in the forest). Just before Kibitaki, there was a closed connecting trail to Hoshino 'Past the Pond' trail, and I decided to go that way, in my search for openings, the meadows and edge habitats which are favored by **Yellow Buntings**. Doing that, I arrived at the trail crossing marked by a red dot in the trail map. This particular spot was a good one, with singing **Japanese Thrushes** around the junction area. A total of five males were seen in the forest. Early in the morning, I had also recorded three **White's Thrushes** and two **Japanese Robins**, on the way there.

Yellow Buntings, mostly juveniles with adults, were readily observed around the large meadow beyond the junction. There are a number of territories in Karuizawa, also in and around Yacho no Mori, and the buntings may be found in semi-open bush habitats after their breeding season. I saw about 10 individuals, probably two families, and heard one singing (a non-breeding?) male at the Yukawa River. It is a skulking species, but patience pays off. My first bird was a handsome adult male, but surprisingly, I could not admire it longer than few seconds.

Why? Because a male **Copper Pheasant** started to display ten meters behind me, unaware of my presence there! Sometimes one really gets lucky; I never expected to be forced to choose between two birds like that! Crouching behind a bush, I admired the pheasant first, the whirring of wings and running around, before returning to the bunting. The areas of relatively barren forest

ground, on the low ridges, suit particularly well to display activities. No time to try to photograph the bird, though.

Fortunately, the buntings stayed around, unlike the elusive pheasant which disappeared and was not seen at this site again. In the general area, there were also two *personata* **Black-faced** and two male **Meadow Buntings**. The latter sang on top of firs, around the large meadow.



Fig. 6. Taking a photo of the map and a close look on it was most helpful. The ‘rest houses’ are wooden shelters with benches to sit on, and a ceiling.



Fig. 7. Key habitats at the ‘Red Dot Junction’: a male **Copper Pheasant** was on the left, displaying on the semi-open forest floor, and **Yellow Buntings** were discovered at the edge of the meadow.

From the 'Red Dot Junction', I proceeded to Akagera Rest House and about 100 meters towards Tsurudamari and back, and then to north, to the start of a steep descend to the 'Path along Stream'. A **Chinese Bamboo Partridge** was heard on the way. Doves and pigeons were scarce, being represented by a single **Oriental Turtle Dove**. Afterwards, I walked to Hoshino along the 'Pond Trail', all the way to Picchio Visitor Center, adding a male *japonicus* **Great Spotted Woodpecker** to my Japan list, soon after the dry pond. One of my two **Asian Stubtails** was singing along the trail. I also saw three *amurensis* **Eurasian Nuthatches** and a *japonica* **Eurasian Treecreeper**.

At Picchio, I was finally able to visit a toilet and to recycle my empty plastic bottles, before buying new ones for the rest of the day. The area was full of day trippers eating in the restaurant or having a picnic on the lawns. The forest, on the other, had been quite peaceful. I encountered only about ten other people there. As could perhaps be anticipated, the crowded visitor center area was not too attractive for me and I returned to the forest as soon as possible.

Between 13.00 and 16.45, the afternoon was spent by walking up to the stream, then on the 'Path along Stream', to the Misozasai Rest House and up to the Akagera Rest House, and to the large meadow next to it. An unusually bold **Chinese Hwamei** was added to the trip list, together with an **Ashy Minivet**. The former species was not the only introduced species there. In addition to the bamboo-partridge, about ten **Red-billed Leiothrixes** were recorded in the forest. In the end, I walked back to Hoshino via the Central Trail, this time all the way on the main trail, past the Kibutaki Rest House. A party of six *japonicus* **Eurasian Jays** greeted me by the Yukawa river.

The widespread, common birds of the forest included: *nippon* **Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers**, *namiyei* **White-backed Woodpeckers**, **Mugimaki Flycatchers** (at least 12 territories) *insularis* **Coal Tits**, **Varied Tits**, *restrictus* **Willow Tits**, **Japanese Tits**, *trivirgatus* **Long-tailed Tits**, **Brown-eared Bulbuls**, **Japanese White-eyes** and **Eurasian Siskins**.

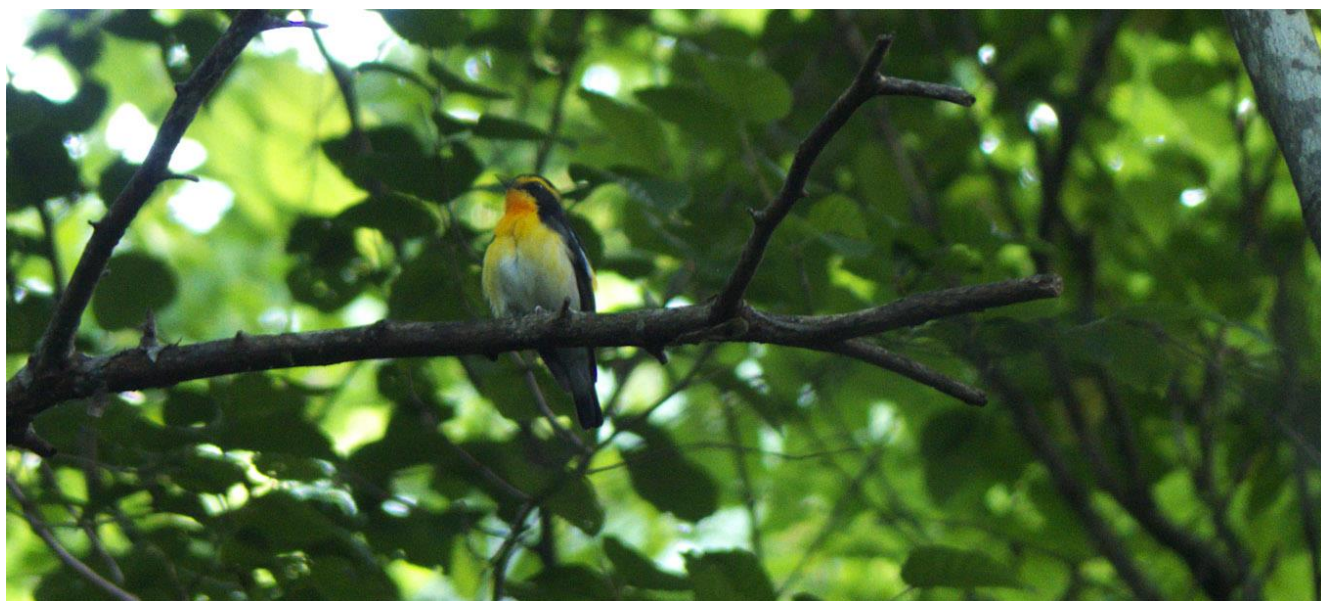


Fig. 8. Mugimaki Flycatchers had occupied the whole forest, defending their plots with vigor.



Fig. 9. The active (several recent eruptions), 2,568 m Asama-yama volcano dominates the view.

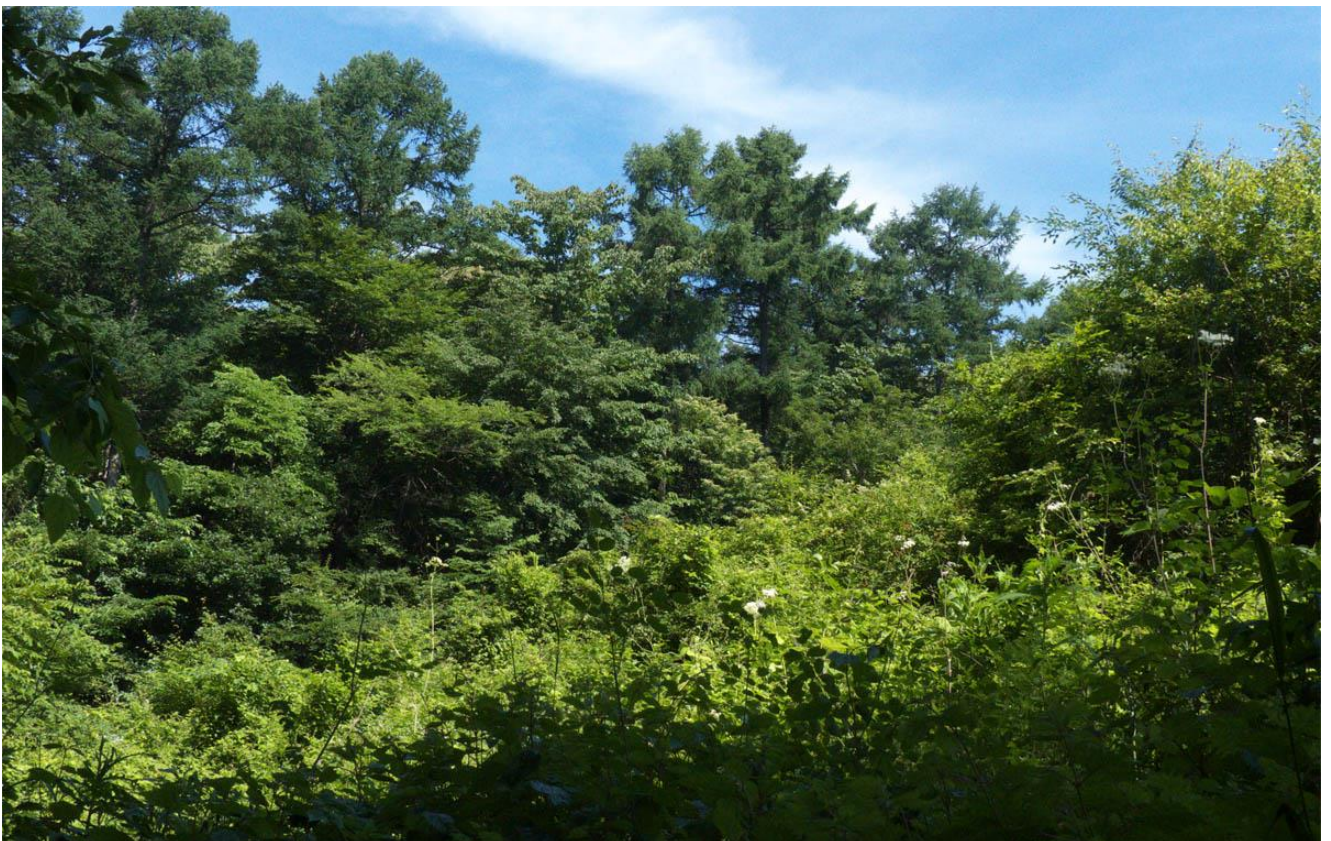


Fig. 10. The dense edge habitat was favored by **Yellow Buntings**.

AT THE END OF THE DAY

My sixth visit in Japan was a very satisfying one, both in terms of birding and as a cultural experience. After Indonesia and the Philippines, it was a relief to be 'at home', in a culture which made me to relax and enjoy the ride, without reservations. The target species was discovered, with ease, despite the fact that the breeding season was over. One should perhaps not underestimate the fact that the numbers of birds are the highest towards the end of the summer, when the juveniles are also around. **Yellow Buntings** may not be at their nest sites in July, but they are still around, and migrate only late in the season.

Among the other bird observations, I especially valued the male *subrufus/intermedius* **Copper Pheasant**, my first record of the species since a lifer trip to Kyushu in December 2014, and the *ijimae* birds there. The pheasants are resident in Karuizawa but nevertheless nothing but guaranteed, as many other visitors, including tour groups, may witness.

If only the music box at the airport shop had been less kitsch, and more Japanese, everything would have been perfect. I had finally found a box with my all-time favorite song, Sakura, but had to leave it there, with a heavy heart! In Finland we used to sing the song at school, even though cherries only blossom in few places in the very south of the nation. The reason the song was in our primary school song books is that it captures the spirit of Japan, and also something we share with its people.

Good luck for your visit in Karuizawa!



Fig. 11. I wish I had more time in Karuizawa, and more money to fund the stay. It would have been great to see one of the **Giant Flying Squirrels** of Yacho no Mori. (Another cute sign!)