

Okinawa & Amami Islands, Japan – June 2010

Nick Brickle

I'd long wanted to visit these endemic-filled islands and my chance finally came to tag a short five day trip onto a longer family holiday to Taiwan. The birding was great, and by any account, very successful. Within 24 hours of arriving on each island I'd seen all of the target birds I was after, including Okinawa Rail, Amami Woodcock, Ryukyu Green-Pigeon, Japanese Woodpigeon, Elegant Scops-Owl, Pryer's [Japanese] Scops-Owl, Ryukyu [Northern] Hawk-Owl, Pryer's Woodpecker, Owston's [White-backed] Woodpecker, Ryukyu Minivet, Japanese Paradise Flycatcher, Ryukyu [Narcissus] Flycatcher, Ryukyu Robin, Lidth's Jay and Amami Thrush!

I spent two nights on Okinawa (26th-27th June), two on Amami (28th-29th) and then one more back on Okinawa (30th). This worked out fine, in that I saw all the birds, but with hindsight it was not ideal: Both my onward flight to Amami, and my return flight to Taipei, were both mid-morning, meaning I had no time for birding on Okinawa on those mornings as I had to make the 2-3 hour drive back to Naha. This effectively only gave me one morning birding in Okinawa, one whole day, and three evenings, whereas on Amami I had two whole days (spread out over three).

Getting there and getting around

I flew to Okinawa from my home in Indonesia via Taipei with China Airlines. They have a daily flight to Okinawa, and also allowed me to break my return in Taiwan for 10 days at no extra cost. To get from Okinawa to Amami and back I flew with 'Ryukyu Air Commuter' (RAC). I booked this via the JAL office in Jakarta then exchanged my booking reference for a ticket by paying the fare in full at the airport in Naha an hour before I flew (very efficient – I like Japan!). The flight wasn't cheap, but then this was never going to be the cheapest birding trip ever. There is also a boat that connects the islands and which appears to sail 2-3 times a week, but the price is similar and the boat sails at night which is when you want to be birding! I booked hire cars online in advance through ToCoo (www2.tocoo.jp). This is easy and worked perfectly.

Accommodation and Food

Having blown my budget on flights and hire cars, I looked to cut a few corners here. Figuring that half the birds were going to require very early morning and night-time searching, I decided not to bother booking any accommodation and instead took a small tent and either pitched that by the side of the road, or simply slept in the car. For food I mostly just stocked up from convenience stores, and once or twice ate lunch in simple looking cafes along the way.

Practicalities

You'll need an international driving license, as you can't hire a car without one. Make sure to get a car with SatNav because it will show all the small tracks that criss-cross Amami and northern Okinawa and this is invaluable. Getting money from ATMs is not easy in Japan, the top tip is that post office ATMs take international cards, plus they show on the SatNav as a red 'T' symbol. Once you figure this out, getting money is easy.

Birding and birding sites

Day 1: Okinawa: I arrived late, around 7pm and opted to drive all the way to the far north, past Cape Hedo and on to the forest tracks just beyond the village of Oku. My target here was owls, particularly 'Pryer's Scops-Owl', that I had been told was occasionally seen and heard around here. I took the first proper forest road, about 1-2 km beyond Oku and stopped after 100m by an obvious left-hand bend. Ryukyu [Northern] Hawk-Owl were calling, as were Elegant Scops Owl and before long a Pryer's [Japanese] Scops-Owl responded to a tape, calling from some high trees above the road. I couldn't get a view into the canopy, but got a brief view of a rufous-brown Scops-Owl with red-orange eyes as it flew from the tree into my torch beam. I also had brief views of the hawk-owl here, also in flight.

After getting my fill of the owls, I moved on around the coast to Ada to set myself up for Okinawa Rail in the morning. I'd read and had information from friends that Okinawa Rail could occasionally be seen bathing along the river at Ada, and that they could be seen crossing a trail on the far bank of the river as they moved between the forest and the mangrove. I manoeuvred the car through a graveyard and positioned it so I had a good view along the track, and then fell asleep.

Day 2: Okinawa: I awoke before my alarm in horror to find that it was already well light by 5:30 am! Without a clue as to whether I'd missed any Okinawa Rail crossing the track I waited in the car about 20 minutes then took a slow walk along the track. The tide was up extremely high, well into the mangrove, and there was no sign of any rails. I did get great views of Ryukyu Robin flitting about in the mangrove, however, so all was not lost. Quickly switching to Plan B, while it was still early, I headed for the car and set off on Route 2 and to my great relief flushed an Okinawa Rail from the roadside after about 1 km! It didn't stick around, but I'd got my main target for the early morning.

Next I carried on up Route 2 and turned right onto the Terukubi-Rindo track. I flushed another Okinawa Rail after about 200 m before parking and continuing on foot. I was looking for Pryer's Woodpecker, which a friend had told me were often seen here. Before long I heard drumming woodpeckers distantly, and then one drumming right next to the road. Quickly moving towards them I got great views of a pair as they moved between the exposed branches of trees eventually disappearing back up the slope. By now it was around 7 am, and I was starting to relax!

I decided to continue along the track in the car to see if I could reach Benoki Dam. This proved easy using the satnav. I took the second left turn for the dam, then left again immediately to pass around the south side. This proved a good move as within the first 3 km of this track I got great views of three more Okinawa Rail and ran into a family party of four Pryer's Woodpeckers!

After the dam I headed back to Hentona to find some breakfast, then set off towards Hiji Falls. I took a look at the car park and saw a few cars there, so decided against the trail and headed up the roads above Hiji falls aiming to drive back to Route 2 cross-country. After a few km I stopped and walked the road through nice forest getting great views of Japanese Paradise Flycatcher (including stunning males), Ryukyu Minivet, Japanese Bush Warbler and Varied Tit, plus more family parties of Pryer's Woodpecker, pretty much completing all the birds I wanted to see in Okinawa! Arriving at Route 2 I headed back to Hentona again for food then fell asleep in the shade for a few hours.

In the late afternoon I headed back onto the Terukubi-Rindo track. This time I carried on past Benoki Dam and headed all the way north cross-country back to Oku. As dusk fell I came across a couple more Okinawa Rail about 2-3 km before hitting Route 70, then great views of another one a few km around the coast from Oku on Route 70. After hearing Pryer's [Japanese] Scops-Owl calling again near Oku, but getting no views, I headed cross-country back to Benoki Dam and parked up in the main visitor car park. Several Elegant Scops-Owl were calling, and it didn't take long before I had great views of a couple of birds. A Ryukyu [Northern] Hawk-Owl was also calling around the dam, but it never broke cover. After I had my fill I drove back to Hentona by the main road and fell asleep in a roadside lay-by.



Northern Okinawa, from the Terukubi-Rindo track



Northern Amami, from Amami Natural Forest

Day 3: Amami: Waking up before it was light I had little choice but to drive for Naha in order to get my 11am flight to Amami. After a quick stop for breakfast I was winging my way across the sea. Another hire car later (something so small I use the word 'car' quite loosely!) and I was off again. By now it was mid-day, and very hot, but I decided to have a go at Amami Natural Forest. This is a lovely spot that I would have spent more time at if I hadn't discovered the delights of Yuwan-dake. A short walk got me great views of Lidth's Jay, Ryukyu Green-Pigeon and a pair of the very distinct Owston's Woodpeckers.

As the afternoon drew on I decided to head to Sumyo where I had been told Amami Thrush is occasionally heard singing. Arriving at the site I had to admit it looked pretty unlikely; just patches of riverside scrub with a few big trees. A gave it a couple of hours as dusk drew in, which at least got me more Ryukyu Green-Pigeons and Lidth's Jays, plus my only view of Japanese Woodpigeon

As night fell I scrapped the Sumyo plan and decided to head to Yuwandake where I had seen from a recent internet post that Amami Woodcock had been seen last year. From Sumyo the drive is only around 30 mins, and heading up the tracks from Uken paid almost instant rewards. After about only 1 km I encountered my first almost tame roadside Amami Woodcock, and within the next 3-4 km I encountered about 15 more! All of them were seen in short grass along the roadside between Uken and the turnoff to 'Yuwandake Park'. I also encountered several Elegant Scops-Owls along the same stretch, giving great views. At the top I took the Yuwandake Park turn off which led after 500m to a small car park and with view point, picnic tables and toilets. I decided to pitch my tent on the grass here, and flushed another couple of woodcock in doing so!



Southern Amami, from Yuwandake Park



Amami Woodcock, Yuwandake

Day 4: Amami: I woke in the predawn to the sound of Ruddy Kingfishers and first tried the trail to the viewing tower (about 100m). This got me another woodcock, Japanese Paradise Flycatcher and a couple of snakes. Next I tried the footpath to the summit of Yuwandake, but this simply got me three snakes in the first 100m and so I decided to head back! Next, in an attempt to avoid being killed by an endemic reptile, I tried walking back down the road. This paid off beautifully when just before the junction to the Yuwandake Park side road, at around 6:30 am, I briefly played a tape of Amami Thrush and to my amazement got an instant response. Within a couple of minutes a bird flew quickly along the road and perched up on an exposed branch just above the road. It proceeded to sit there singing for the next 20 minutes giving me stunning views! In this time a second thrush also started calling 50-100m below the main track. I don't know what the local ethics on using tapes on birds is, but it really didn't take much to get the bird singing, and then it continued without any encouragement for ages. To my mind this must be less disturbing to a bird that is used to singing to defend a breeding territory than trying to spot-light roosting birds at night, which seems to be the accepted alternative? Glowing with the delight of seeing a species I had been incredibly pessimistic of being able to find, I wandered back towards the car. This got me Ryukyu Flycatcher on the way and completed the last of the target birds on Amami within only 16 hours of stepping off the plane!

At a bit of a loss what to do next I headed along the west coast back to Naze. Somewhere along the way I passed a sign for the 'Amami Nature Centre' and thought that would be worth a look. After watching a nice film of the endemic animals of Amami I decided I would devote the coming evening to finding Amami Black Rabbit. I picked up a leaflet that had a map with lots of dots on it, and while I couldn't tell whether these showed where rabbits were seen, or where they had been run over, either way I figured it was a good start for later!

Back in Naze by lunch-time I grabbed some food and decided to take a look at the famous Kinsakubaru track. Getting to the junction I was surprised to see it was unpaved, in contrast to all the other tracks I'd been on. I tried driving a bit in my mini-car, but gave up and turned around after bottoming out over ruts a few times. Instead I headed by the old roads back toward Sumiyo where my rabbit map suggested the things were most common (or run over most often?). On the tracks above Sumiyo I tried a side trail in the evening towards an obvious telecom tower. This was paved for the first 500 m, then unsurfaced for the rest 1 km more. I parked and walked to the tower, getting more Lidth's Jays on the way. Just before the tower a concrete path branched up to the left, and as I walked I could see loads of rabbit droppings all along the side of the track. I decided to walk back and get the car and drove it along the unsurfaced track to park at the end of the side trail with a good view along the first 50m. As night fell I shone my spotlight along the trail and immediately got a bright green eye-shine back. As I looked on I realised to my horror that this was a large feral cat clearly looking for the same thing as me! Giving up on my car-hide I walked slowly up the concrete track towards the tower, and at the very top to my delight the torch lit up an Amami Black Rabbit feeding in the short grass completely unconcerned by my torch beam. After viewing it for several minutes from about 5m away it seemed to realise I was there and with a quick squeak it disappeared into the undergrowth. Driving back along the track to the main road then got me about five more Amami Woodcock! After this I headed back to my campsite at Yuwandake (more woodcocks...) and fell asleep happy to the sound of Elegant Scops and Ryuku [Northern] Hawk Owls.



Beautiful roadside forest, Yuwandake, Amami



My 'campsite' at Yuwandake Park

Day 5: Okinawa: After a bit of birding around Yuwandake I drove slowly back to the airport in time for my flight back to Okinawa. Arriving in Naha I picked up a hire car again and drove all the way to Cape Hedo where I got distant views of Ryukyu Green-Pigeon, then I took to the side trails around Oku, which got me great views of a family of four Okinawa Rail. As night fell I was once again at 'owl bend' near Oku. No adult Pryer's Scops calling this time, but at the junction of the track and Route 70 I heard a juvenile scops-owl calling, then another. Quickly getting on these birds I could see their feathering was not fully developed but what they had was all rufous-brown tones and their eyes were a deep orange-red colour suggesting they were indeed juvenile Pryer's [Japanese] Scops-Owl. Leaving them behind I headed back around the coast to Hentona and fell asleep in a lay-by.

Day 6: Taiwan! No time for birding, so I just headed back to Naha to catch my flight to Taiwan and then turned my attention to finding Mikado Pheasant!

Site info

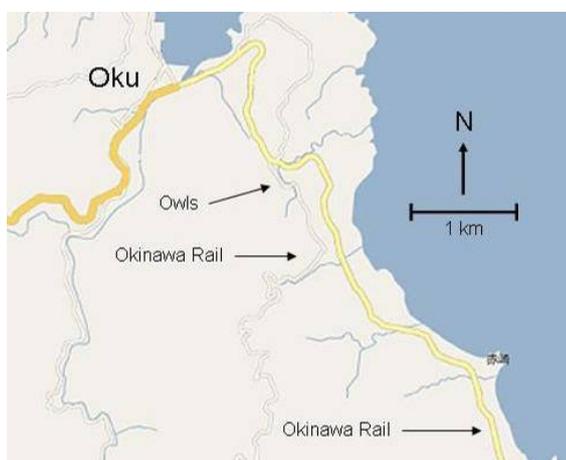
Most of the tracks and areas I visited are described well in Mark Brazil's 'Birdwatchers Guide to Japan'. Here I give some details of a few sites that are not so well described.

1. Okinawa: Oku area

Oku lies in the far north of Okinawa, just beyond Cape Hedo at the end of Route 58. Nice forest tracks head south inland from just before, and just after, the village. I spent much of my time looking for owls on the first 200m of the track just beyond Oku. Following this track from Route 70 brings you first to Benoki Dam, and then on to Route 2. This is the full length of the Terukubi-Rindo track and is paved and easily passable the whole way. I saw Okinawa Rail near Oku both times I passed a section of the track about 1-2 km inland from Route 70, where the track rises gradually through an area lined with long grass. I also saw rails from Route 70 itself about 6-7 km further east near a nice beach with a rough car park. Rail tracks were clearly visible in puddles in the car park itself, suggesting it could be a nice place to try in the early morning.

2. Okinawa: Ada

This site is described pretty well on some internet posts, but I thought I'd include a map anyway. Ada lies at the intersection of Route 2 and Route 70 on the north-east coast of Okinawa. I tried looking for Okinawa Rail by staking out the small dirt track on the south side of the river, but others have viewed them well from the north bank. The only rail I saw here was on the drive out!



Oku area map, northern Okinawa



Ada map, north-east Okinawa

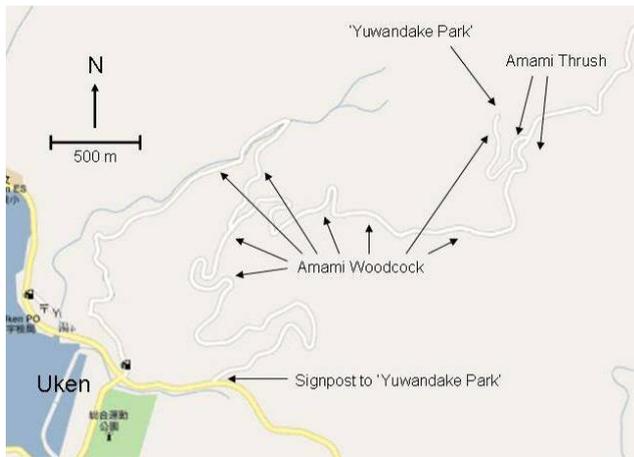
3. Amami: Yuwandake

This proved a great site, and got me all of the endemic birds of Amami. Access is from Uken village at the southern end of Amami and is about 1-2 hours drive from the airport via Route 58 then Route 85. There are several tracks up, but the most obvious is just as you come into Uken, and is signposted to 'Yuwandake Park'. Another track heads up from with Uken village itself. I saw Amami Woodcock on both tracks, and again after they join, as far as Yuwandake Park. There were then more woodcock on the short grass around the car park at the top. I saw and heard Amami Thrush around the junction of the track to Yuwandake Park.

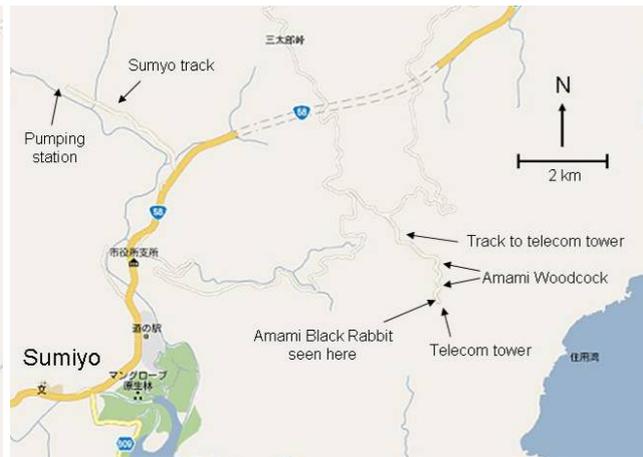
4. Amami: Sumyo and 'Rabbit Hill'

Sumyo is an occasional site for Amami Thrush, although the habitat looks so degraded this amazes me. Coming from Naze you pass through the long 'Santaro' tunnel and the turn off for Sumyo is on the right after about 200m. Following this track brings you eventually to a small water pumping station near the scrubby forest patches where the thrush has been heard. About 500 m back from the pumping station a small track heads up the northern slope into nice forest. This actually looks more hopeful for the thrush, but I don't know if one has ever been seen here.

I don't know the formal name of 'Rabbit Hill' but I came across it by following the old road from Naze to Sumiyo. Near the highest point on the road a paved track heads south towards an obvious telecom tower. After about 500 m it becomes unpaved, and after about 1.5 km it divides with a smaller concrete track heading left to the tower, and the main trail continuing around the contour. There were lots of rabbit droppings all along the concrete trail, and I saw one at the very top near the tower itself. The track also had Amami Woodcock, with around five seen in the top 1 km.



Yuwandake map, southern Amami



Sumiyo and 'Rabbit Hill' map, east-central Amami

Acknowledgements

My biggest thanks go to Richard Carden, who provided me loads of invaluable information, and talked me through getting to some of the sites and finding the birds. Also to Chris Cook for comments on the owls, and Ingo Waschkie for posting such useful information on the internet at <http://webspaces.webring.com/people/ek/kantorilode/Species/AmamiOkinawa.html>.

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Bogor, Indonesia. July 2010.

Systematic list of birds seen

Okinawa: 26-28th June and 30-1st July

Pacific Reef-Heron (*Egretta sacra*)

Several around the coast

Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*)

One seen flying over Benoki Dam

Okinawa Rail (*Gallirallus okinawae*)

At least 15 seen, including: Route 2 heading west from Ada; first 1km of Terukubi-Rindo track from Route 2; on south side of Benoki Dam track; Route 70 about 5km south-east of Oku; On the Terukubi-Rindo track about 2km south of Route 70 near Oku.

Oriental Turtle-Dove (*Streptopelia orientalis*)

Common everywhere.

Ryukyu Green-Pigeon (*Treron riukiensis*)

Several seen and heard around Oku and Cape Hedo. Formerly Whistling Green-Pigeon, *Treron formosae*.

Pryer's [Japanese] Scops-Owl (*Otus [semitorques] pryeri*)

An adult heard calling and seen briefly on 26th June. Two juveniles seen well on 30th. Orange-red eyes and appeared to respond to tape. Feathering not fully developed but generally brown-rufous tones. Some place within Japanese Scops-Owl, *Otus semitorques*.

Elegant Scops-Owl (*Otus elegans*)

Calling on tracks near Oku, and seen well around Benoki Dam. (aka Ryukyu Scops-Owl).

Ryukyu [Northern] Hawk-Owl (*Ninox [japonica] totogo*)

Seen and heard on tracks near Oku. Heard calling around Benoki Dam. Some place within Northern Hawk-Owl, *N. japonica*, or Brown Hawk-Owl, *N. scutulata*.

Ruddy Kingfisher (*Halcyon coromanda*)

Ssp. *bangsi*. Heard calling on tracks near Oku and Cape Hedo.

Japanese Woodpecker (*Picus awokera*)

Ssp. *nigrescens*. One seen from tracks above Hiji Falls.

Pryer's Woodpecker (*Sapheopipo noguchii*)

At least 12 seen and more heard, including Okuni-Rindo track from Hiji Falls to Route 2; first 1 km of Terukubi-Rindo track north of Route 2; on tracks south of Benoki Dam. Birds seen included obvious family parties of up to four birds. More heard. (aka. Okinawa Woodpecker).

Ryukyu Minivet (*Pericrocotus tegimae*)

Seen and heard on tracks above Hiji Falls towards Route 2.

Japanese [Large-billed] Crow (*Corvus [macrorhynchos] japonicus*)

Ssp. *connectens*. Lots, everywhere. Some place with Large-billed Crow, *C. macrorhynchos*.

Japanese Paradise-Flycatcher (*Terpsiphone atrocaudata*)

Ssp. *illex*. Amazing males, plus female-types, seen at several locations on Okuni-Rindo track from Hiji Falls to Route 2. Female-types seen on tracks near Oku.

Small House [Pacific] Swallow (*Hirundo [tahitica] javanica*)

Ssp. *namiyei*. Several locations, including Benoki Dam and Cape Hedo. Some place with Pacific Swallow, *H. tahitica*.

Varied Tit (*Sittiparus varius*)

Ssp. *amamii*. Seen once. Very distinctive with brown face, looking more like the ssp 'owstoni' than nominate 'varius'.

Light-vented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus sinensis*)

Ssp. *orii*. A pair seen on wires from Route 2 heading west from Ada. (aka Chinese Bulbul).

Brown-eared Bulbul (*Ixos amaurotis*)

Ssp. *pryeri*. Very common throughout.

Japanese Bush-Warbler (*Cettia diphone*)

Unknown ssp. Similar in appearance to 'cantans' with darkish brown breast-band.

Ryukyu Robin (*Erithacus komadori*)

Seen at Ada (at sea level in Mangrove!), on Okuni-Rindo track from Hiji Falls to Route 2, on Terukubi-Rindo track north of Route 2, and on tracks south of Oku.

Red-bellied [Blue] Rock-Thrush (*Monticola [solitarius] philippensis*)

Seen on several beaches, and along road, between Cape Hedo and Hentona. Often placed within Blue rock-Thrush, *M. solitarius*.

Japanese White-eye (*Zosterops japonicus*)

Ssp. *loochooensis*. Common.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*)

Around houses etc.

Amami: 26-28th June

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*)

A couple along the coast.

Ruddy-breasted Crake (*Porzana fusca*)

A pair seen bathing in a roadside puddle at dusk near Sumiyo mangroves.

Amami Woodcock (*Scolopax mira*)

At least 25 birds seen, mostly around Yuwan-dake, including tracks up, and on grass at 'Yuwan-dake Park'. Also five birds seen on the track to 'Rabbit Hill'. Mostly birds seen at night, but also dusk and dawn. Seemed to prefer areas with short grass at the roadside (wet or dry).

Japanese Wood-Pigeon (*Columba janthina*)

A single bird seen at close range in flight over forested slopes near the water pumping station at Sumyo. Not seen or heard elsewhere!

Oriental Turtle-Dove (*Streptopelia orientalis*)

Common in open areas and forest tracks.

Ryukyu Green-Pigeon (*Treron riukuensis*)

Common throughout forest areas. Occasionally very approachable. Formerly considered within Whistling Green-Pigeon *Treron formosae*.

Elegant Scops-Owl (*Otus elegans*)

Common around Yuwan-dake. Very tame! (aka Ryukyu Scops-Owl).

Ryukyu [Northern] Hawk-Owl (*Ninox [japonica] totogo*)

At least one bird around Yuwan-dake Park. Some place within Northern Hawk-Owl, *N. japonica*, or Brown Hawk-Owl, *N. scutulata*.

Common Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*)

One seen from a bridge near coast somewhere!

Ruddy Kingfisher (*Halcyon coromanda*)

Ssp. *bangsi*. Several heard and seen, including Yuwan-dake and near 'Rabbit Hill'.

Pygmy Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos kizuki*)

Ssp. *amamii*. Several present around Yuwan-dake Park.

Owston's [White-backed] Woodpecker (*Dendrocopos [leucotos] owstoni*)

A couple seen in Amami Natural Forest, at least four more seen around Yuwan-dake. Often placed within White-backed Woodpecker, *D. leucotos*.

Ryukyu Minivet (*Pericrocotus tegimae*)

One seen near Yuwan-dake.

Lidth's Jay (*Garrulus lidthi*)

Seen and heard in most forest areas, including Amami Natural Forest, Yuwan-dake, 'Rabbit Hill' and Sumyo.

Japanese [Large-billed] Crow (*Corvus [macrorhynchos] japonicus*)

Ssp. *connectens*. Lots, but not as many as on Okinawa. Some place with Large-billed Crow, *C. macrorhynchos*.

Japanese Paradise-Flycatcher (*Terpsiphone atrocaudata*)

Ssp. *illex*. At least four present around Yuwan-dake Park. Calling a lot in the early morning.

Small House [Pacific] Swallow (*Hirundo [tahitica] javanica*)

Ssp. *namiyei*. Several around Yuwan-dake. Often placed within Pacific Swallow, *H. tahitica*.

Eastern Great Tit (*Parus [major] minor*)

Ssp. *amamiensis*. Seen in mixed flock at Yuwan-dake. Formerly considered within Great Tit, *P. major*.

Brown-eared Bulbul (*Ixos amaurotis*)

Ssp. *Ogawae*. Loads everywhere.

Zitting Cisticola (*Cisticola juncidis*)

Several around agricultural fields near Sumyo, plus elsewhere.

Ryukyu Flycatcher (*Ficedula owstoni*)

One adult male seen just below Yuwan-dake Park. Formerly considered within Narcissus Flycatcher, *F. narcissina*.

Ryukyu Robin (*Erithacus komadori*)

One seen in Amami Natural Forest.

Amami Thrush (*Zoothera major*)

Two singing and one seen well just below Yuwan-dake Park. Attracted initially to brief play of tape, then sat on open branch above road singing for 20 mins! Joined by another bird calling from 50m below the road at same location. Nice! Formerly considered within Scaly Thrush, *Z. dauma*.

Japanese White-eye (*Zosterops japonicus*)

Common in most forest areas.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*)

Around houses etc.