

Summer 2010 in Japan

From Late June through early August I spent my time in Japan doing research in relation to my dissertation, as part of the EAPSI Fellowship I was awarded. This was my first time in East Asia (or really, Asia) so of course I tried to get as many lifers of birds, mammals, and herps as possible. However most of my trips were bird focused and of short duration, as I generally only had a weekend (or usually a single day) for birding and mammalwatching. Also July and August are rather horrible months to be in Japan, with high humidity and heat, and animal activity tended to be rather low. Probably the most rewarding (mammal wise) was a night drive with Neil Davidson, an expat birder, in Ashyu forest near Kyoto. I managed 4 lifer mammals on this trip.

Major references I used were the excellent Wild Mammals of Japan, the old and increasingly out of date bird finding guide to Japan (which actually contains a lot of good mammalwatching info) and the Kantori birding list.

Japanese Macaque: Iwatayama Monkey Park

I made a special Saturday morning visit to Iwatayama Monkey park in June to see this species, which is basically guaranteed. The monkeys are fed here and so a large troop is resident at the top of the steep hill. For a couple of hundred yen tourists can buy food to feed monkeys through the chainlink feeding hut at the top. Overall good lucks, but expect a zoo like atmosphere. Convenient for visitors in Kyoto, and covered in the Lonely Planet Guide for Japan

Eurasian Red Squirrel: Supposedly common, but like the Siberian Chipmunk only a last minute encounter, and only encountered at Obhiro Forest Park in Hokkaido, where they were fairly common

Japanese Squirrel: One individual seen near bird feeders at the Mount Fuji Bird Sanctuary. Probably a good spot for this species for anyone really hankering to encounter this endemic squirrel

Pallas's Squirrel: This non-native species was encountered once at the Daibutsu Temple in Kakamura. This species is increasing in the area and is considered somewhat a pest.

Siberian Chipmunk: Only one seen, at close range at Utonai Lake. I expect this species and the Red Squirrel are probably much easier later or earlier in the season

Gray Red-backed Vole: One crossing the road at Notsuke Hanto was probably referable to this species

Large Japanese Field Mouse: One crossing and then scurrying along the road in Ashyu forest was probably referable to this taxon.

Wild Boar: Good views of a sounder of juveniles were seen on the night drive in Ashyu Forest. These were unexpected and a first for Neil.

Chinese Finless Porpoise: Good views were had from the Choshi Marine Institute whale watch, which targets this species from July through August.

Harbor Porpoise. These were commonly seen while seawatching from Kiritappu in Hokkaido. Oddly enough I never encountered the most common of the three porpoises on this trip (Dall's)

Pygmy Killer Whale: Probably the best mammal of the trip; A group of 4 paralleled the Tomokomai-Nagoya Ferry for a short distance. Japan has one of the largest concentrations of this scarce whale, but even here it is rarely reported, at least from ferries.

Sika: A few were seen early morning in the Mt Fuji area, They were common on the night drive in Ashyu forest, and they were abundant on the Shiretoko Peninsula and adjacent parts of Northeastern Hokkaido. If you go to Hokkaido and don't see this species, you need to find a new hobby.

Birdlike Noctule: One feeding at 3:00 in the morning in Shin-okubo, as we awaited our departure to Mt Fuji, was probably referable to this taxon

Japanese Pipistrelle: A bat probably referable to this taxon was seen feeding at dusk in Sanbanze. Other bats were seen in flight throughout my stay but couldn't be identified to species.

Red Fox: Common in Hokkaido, this species was seen probably at least 10 times, often quite tame and near the road.

Siberian Weasel: One animal ran along a bridge during our night drive in Ashyu forest. This is an introduced species closely related to the Japanese Weasel, that is quickly spreading in Japan.

Japanese Marten: This species was seen crossing the road on our Ashyu forest nightdrive, although it was more an orange blur due to me being half asleep. This is often seen both day and night in the area.

Masked Palm Civet: Two individuals afforded excellent looks shortly after our encounter with the Marten.

Stuff I missed: A lot obviously. I had to cancel my weekend trip to Karuizawa, which cost me Japanese Giant Flying Squirrel. I also didn't luck into any Serow on Mt Fuji, where they are apparently not uncommonly seen. Brown Bears are common on Hokkaido, but I missed these as well; There is apparently a good boat cruise off the Shiretoko peninsula which easily gets these as well as Dall's Porpoise, Pacific White-sided Dolphin, and Steller's Sea Lion. Sea Otter and both Spotted and Harbor Seal can also be often encountered via seawatching in these areas, but we looked upon no marine carnivorans, only Harbor Porpoises. I spent some time hunting for Asiatic (or Northern) Pikas at Daitsetzuan National Park in Hokkaido, but thick fog foiled my efforts.

I made one roundtrip ferry ride to Hachijojima Island in the Izus, and didn't see a single marine mammal. Pantropical Spotted Dolphins and Sperm Whales are apparently not uncommon and Indo-Pacific Bottlenose Dolphin is found around Mikurijima and Miyakijima,. I rode only one leg of the Tomokomai-Nagoya Ferry, and while I managed the rarely seen Pygmy Killer Whale, other marine mammals are also regularly seen on both north and southbound trips (depending on time of year) were missed. These include Northern Fur Seal, Killer Whale, Pacific White-sided Dolphin, Dall's Porpoise, and endemic and interesting form of Short-finned Pilot Whale, and Baird's Beaked Whale. Chinese Finless Porpoises are also commonly encountered in Nagoya harbor from the Ferry.

As mentioned Ashyu Forest was good. Other stuff Neil has seen that I missed include Raccoon Dogs (common), Japanese Small Flying Squirrel (uncommon), Japanese Weasel (uncommon?), and Asiatic Black Bear (rare).

Two months didn't allow me to go everywhere I wanted, but over the course of the summer I did dig up information that other mammal watchers might find useful.

For terrestrial mammals one spot I would like to visit in the future is the Yamabiko Lodge located in the mountains near Natusawa. This requires a 6-7 hour hike up the mountain, but the lodge has feeders which attract Large Japanese Field Mouse, Japanese Dormouse, and Japanese Small Flying Squirrel, and is well known to Japanese photographers, who are able to take pictures at very close range of the tame rodents. Miike Forest, a well known birding spot, would also be nice to visit. From birding trip reports Japanese Badger appears to be encountered regularly. If you are flexible on counting, Japanese Weasels are (unfortunately) quite common on Miyake Island in the Izus

I spent much time researching Marine Mammals. For people visiting Tokyo, the best bet is the Choshi Marine Institute, located several hours from Tokyo by public transit. This whale watching group operates year round, but targets different species at different seasons. I went on the two hour Finless Porpoise watch and easily saw them. You will probably need help booking a tour, as the operator knows very little English and the website is also in Japanese (<http://www.choshi-iruka-watching.co.jp/>)

November-December: Sperm Whale and Risso's Dolphin, with Killer and Melon-headed Whales less regularly.

February-March: Northern Fur Seal

April-June: Pacific White-sided, Common Bottlenose, and Striped Dolphins. Seen perhaps less commonly are Northern Right Whale Dolphins, Baird's Beaked Whales, and Dall's Porpoise.

July-October: Finless Porpoise

The Kie Peninsula seems like a great location, with False Killer Whales and a variety of more tropical whales. However access to westerners is likely to be difficult, since this was the area where The Cove was shot, and unlike most parts of Japan the locals don't appear to be tolerant of foreigners. Apparently though they do run tours in the off-season.

Ogata on the main island of Shikoku is world famous as probably the best spot for Eden's Whale in the world in summer, although as I understand the population is declining from shifts in food supply.

Lastly, a variety of operators work in the Ogasawaras with dolphin swim and dolphin watches targeting Spinner, Pantropical Spotted, and Indo-Pacific Bottlenose year round, and Humpback and Sperm Whales at other times. False Killer Whales and Brydes Whales also seem possible here, and probably other tropical whales. There is also the added bonus of the endemic Flying Fox, which some of the local nature tours do nightwalks for. However the only access to the island is via Ferry, which only operates 5 times a month generally, and is a voyage of several days.

Hopefully this is helpful for some people. Special thanks to Neil Davidson, Chris Cook, Tadasu Yamada, and Kaz Shinoda for the helpful information.