



With what was, in hindsight, truly awful timing, I had booked a family trip to China in January of 2020 for travel that June. Needless to say, the trip didn't happen and eventually, after a great deal of back-and-forth, we received a travel credit which had to be utilized by May of 2025. Tracey and I had already visited China by this time, so we decided to head to Japan instead. Most of the trip focused on cultural sites, but I thought I would post a report to update some of the information on [mammalwatching.com](http://mammalwatching.com) about the wildlife sites we did visit.

Arrival in Haneda airport was uneventful although the lines for immigration were exceptionally long. We bought tickets for the limousine bus leaving in 6 minutes, only to spend the next 5 ½ minutes trying to find the correct exit. We eventually found it, feeling smug seeing the bus 20 metres in front of us, to

have it pull away just before we reached the door. We returned to the ticket counter to be told, “public transportation leaves on time in Japan”. This is a very true statement. It was late at night and we discovered the next bus was the following morning, so we bought Monorail and JR Metro tickets, which is probably what we should have done initially. Alighting at Ayase station, I discovered the Google directions said things like “walk 70 metres, then turn left”. Not having an inborn distance counter this was somewhat frustrating. We walked vaguely south. I paused to rest, wondering where we were, and Tracey brightly said, “Isn’t that the Subaru Guesthouse”, pointing to the building across the road which had a door plaque about the size of a credit card announcing its name. This being Japan, the front door was unlocked and we were able to let ourselves into our room with the door code we had been emailed.

The next few days didn’t result in any mammal sightings, but did produce sights aplenty and lots of delicious food. A couple of days later, we arose early and headed back to Haneda for our flights to Amami-Oshima. We popped into a restaurant at the airport for breakfast and watched the few other patrons, elegant middle-aged women drinking beers at 9:30 am. Arriving in Amami, we discovered that little English is spoken on the island, including by folks working in the airport. After miming “Car Rental”, a helpful lady from the information desk walked us out to the car rental shuttle. At Budget, the attendant put on a brief English video and we were quickly on our way south. Amami is a lush and lightly populated island and the drive was beautiful. We arrived in Setouchi about 5:00 pm and found the Sakai Guesthouse, which looks a bit grim and forbidding from the outside but was fine inside. We went out for dinner and ended up in a restaurant with no English menu and, worse yet, no WiFi to translate the Japanese one. The folks at the table beside us were receiving their meal, so we pointed at their sashimi platter, tofu salad, shrimp tempura and beers and that became our meal as well. All were delicious. Outside, we saw our first mammal of the trip, Ryuku Flying Fox, overhead.

We managed to convey to the guesthouse owner that we were interested in seeing Amami Rabbits and he mapped out a route which he indicated should produce some sightings. Leaving about 8:00 pm, we initially drove through some tunnels, which were as unproductive as one would imagine, and then suddenly there was a black blob on the roadside verge. Tracey was asleep by this point so my first task was to awaken her, by which time the rabbit was gone and I now had a groggily sleepy and somewhat disbelieving partner beside me. We turned down highway 612 and soon saw a second rabbit by the side of the road. By now it was 10:00 pm and I was feeling a bit muzzy from a cold, so we decided to call it a night, having proven the hypothesis that self-driving randomly around the island could, in fact, produce rabbit sightings.

We went for a walk around town the next morning, then drove to Hinohana Beach for a swim. Not likely. Despite the sea turtles swimming around, the water was surprisingly cold and we did little more than wade around. For dinner we went to another restaurant with a purely Japanese menu, but that had WiFi so that we could translate it. We ordered okonomiyaki. What arrived at the table were the ingredients for the dish – egg, cabbage, batter, etc. – but no instructions. Thanks to our air of befuddlement, the owner came over and showed us how to turn on the teppan, mix the ingredients and so on. The okonomiyaki turned out to be delicious and filling and excellent fare prior to a night of rabbit-spotting. We left about 6:00 pm, driving west and then back up the 612. We saw a total of six rabbits, all of them on the vegetated verges of the road. A couple of times the rabbits did sit still for a few seconds, but by the time I stopped the car and turned on the camera and spotlight they had moved off into the vegetation. We went for a walk on a small dirt road and Tracey saw a Eurasian Wild Pig, but none of the hoped-for endemic rodents. An Amami Woodcock obligingly posed for photos.



We drove to the Amami Nature Observation Park near Tatsugo, a nice piece of forest with some trails at the top and managed to see several of the endemic birds for which Amami is known. Returning to the airport, we dropped off the car and flew back to Tokyo, from where we took the train to Shinagawa and then a shinkansen to Kyoto. Kyoto was packed with tourists and for good reason – there are few more interesting cities in the world.





The next couple of days were filled with sight-seeing of the non-mammal kind. On the third morning we walked up to Aroshiyama Monkey Park on the edge of the city. Over 100 Japanese Macaques live in the surrounding forest and a small building in the park where visitors can enter and feed the monkeys through the bars results in lots of close monkey-viewing opportunities. As a wilderness wildlife-viewing experience this leaves a lot to be desired but it certainly is an entertaining way to while away a few hours.



We took the one-hour local train ride to Nara that afternoon. Nara was the capital of Japan prior to it moving to Kyoto. Even better, Nara Deer Park, on the edge of the city, backs on to an extensive forest, Kasugayama Primeval Forest. We took a local bus from the train station to Nara Park and immediately found ourselves surrounded by dozens of Japanese (Sika) Deer, then made our way to the Deer Park Inn which is conveniently located inside the Deer Park and very close to the protected forest. That evening was largely spent exploring the town, while the following day was spent visiting the various shrines and temples, but I managed to hike along the road past the Deer Park Inn into the forest after dark and ended up seeing about a dozen Japanese Giant Flying Squirrels, several of which were in trees just beside the road. I also found a Common Raccoon, an introduced species which is spreading rapidly in Japan.









The next couple of nights we spent in Kobe. We went into Osaka one day thinking we might visit the World Expo. This is not a destination for spontaneous visitors, nor for the faint of heart. We arrived about 9:30 am, along with much of the rest of the world, then discovered that if one hadn't purchased tickets in advance there wasn't much point in going. We were told we couldn't even buy tickets until 11:00 am, at which point we would then have to join another enormous line-up. We bailed and went to the Osaka Aquarium instead, which turned out to be an excellent choice. The main tank in particular was spectacular, containing two Whale Sharks, rays, reef sharks, Trevally, Guitar Fish, Mola-mola and many others. Afterwards we headed to the ceramics museum, which turned out to be closed on Mondays. I realized that, despite the unpredictability of wildlife sightings, I probably had a better track record with those than with finding open tourist attractions.

We spent the next day at Himeji Castle, truly one of Japan's outstanding sights, then traveled to Hiroshima to visit the Peace Dome and the museum, so sobering I couldn't read every exhibit. The next day we went to Miyajima (Itsukushima), a small island in Hiroshima Bay with forests, ancient temples and a high density of Japanese Deer. We climbed through the forests to the top of Mount Misen, the highest point on the island, but didn't see any mammals apart from the ubiquitous deer.





One of my most desired non-mammal species to see has always been the Japanese Giant Salamander. I had done some research prior to the trip that indicated they might be findable in the rivers that tumble off Mount Daisen on the northwestern coast of Honshu. Needless to say, that became one of our goals on the trip, so we headed to Yonago, the nearest sizable town. No trains head there from Hiroshima, so we took a bus, dropped off our stuff at a hotel, had lunch and then headed out on our quest. One of Japan's quietest rail lines runs east from Yonago. We debarked in the tiny station of Mikuriya, with Mount Daisen looming in the distance. We found a small stream and started ascending it until we arrived close to a larger river. I waded in to this larger stream at dusk and quickly found some small salamanders but no giants. A couple of small bats with audible clicks flitted around, later identified for me as Greater Japanese Horseshoe Bats. We descended along the river, checking it at various access points. We saw two Japanese Raccoon Dogs (Tanuki) which quickly disappeared into the reeds along the river banks. At

about 8:40 pm, Tracey announced that she was done, so we walked to the Nawa station. As is often the case, the last hurried part of the walk along the river looked like excellent habitat and will be the target of my next giant salamander spotting expedition.



After a breakfast of various species of marine life served cold, we went to the train station and booked tickets for Okayama, then the shinkansen to Nagoya, and then a regular train to Matsumoto. A train journey of this distance would take several days in Canada. In Japan we arrived that afternoon, helped by tight connections along the way. We visited Matsumoto Castle, which was so stunning that we returned to it after our dinner of Chinese food.

The next morning, we picked up a rental car and then went to the Matsumoto Museum of Art. Matsumoto is the hometown of Yayoi Kusama and the gallery features a stunning exhibit of her art, along with other excellent exhibits. We arrived at Berg Cot in the mid-afternoon. Berg Cot is mentioned elsewhere on [mammal-watching.com](http://mammal-watching.com) but I will confirm that it remains excellent. The rooms are lovely, there is an onsen and, best of all, wildlife wanders through the yard. About 5:00 pm, two Tanuki showed up and posed for photos. Shortly afterwards, I saw movement in the neighbour's yard and went over to investigate. To my surprise and delight, a Japanese Badger was digging in the leaf litter, then ran through the Berg Cot yard before stopping and posing for a minute. The host, Dagatsu, told me this was the first badger seen there that season. During the delicious five course dinner, a Japanese Marten appeared at the feeder but disappeared whenever I opened the door to try to get some photos without glass in the way. A night walk revealed lots of Japanese Sika Deer, another (or possibly the same) Japanese Marten, two badgers a couple of properties further along the road, a weasel-like face that appeared for a second



under a chain-link fence, then vanished before I could get a clear look, and two Tanuki, likely the same ones seen earlier.





An early morning walk didn't produce anything new, but a Japanese Squirrel made an appearance at the feeder during breakfast, along with Japanese Grosbeaks, Bullfinches and Tits. We drove to nearby ski resort for a hike, then walked around Tateshina Lake. Tanuki appeared again that evening. I learned that a Masked Palm Civet had come to the feeder the previous night, but the proprietor had not mentioned this to us as he didn't like them! I suggested I would like to see one, so he called me about 9:00 pm when one appeared at the feeder. Masked Palm Civets are not native to Japan, but appear to have been introduced hundreds of years ago with limited ecological impact as far as we know. A night walk produced the same deer and Tanuki as the previous night, along with some small bats flying around.









The Japanese Squirrel was present again the next morning before we left to drive to the Mount Asama trailhead. Mount Asama is known as a dependable sight for Japanese Serow and we received detailed instructions before setting off. After a couple of hours, we reached an open area with a conveniently located sign indicating this was “Serow Meadows”. Tracey lay down for a nap while I scouted ahead. As generally happens, I saw nothing while Tracey arose from her nap and quickly sighted a Japanese Serow high above, feeding on grass just below some rocky cliffs. I starting climbing up to try for some better photos. After almost an hour, I still couldn’t see the serow as it was behind a rock somewhere so I reluctantly climbed back down, resigned to having to point out a tiny black dot on my photos and try to convince people that was a serow. As we drove back down the dirt road to the turnoff, there, by the side of the road, was another Japanese Serow. He conveniently stood up to allow for better photos and we



headed for Karuizawa, about 45 minutes away. The Sora Hotel advertises that it is pet-friendly. What they don't mention is that they take pet-friendliness to an extreme degree. All the art is of dogs, there is an indoor dog run, people take their dogs for meals in the dining room and arriving there without a dog elicits surprised reactions. We drove into town for dinner and then I decided to do a walk in the Wild Bird Park, about a 15-minute drive away. After parking, the first animal I saw was another Japanese Serow, while a Red Fox crossed my track on the way back and another across the road while I was driving through town.



We drove back through Matsumoto and up higher into the Japanese Alps the next day. There was still deep snow along the Usidone Pond trail which curtailed our hike there, so we stopped at some waterfalls along the way for walks instead. Coming back down the mountain, we found a troop of Japanese Macaques by the side of the road, a slightly more naturalistic setting than the park near Kyoto. A night at a lovely homestay just outside Matsumoto and then a train back to Tokyo rounded out the trip.

We loved visiting Japan. Perhaps in part because I had just returned from Central African Republic, and there are few places more different from each other. Perhaps because I had contracted malaria in CAR and, having had only a few days between the trips, I took a course of Malarone on spec and started to feel vastly better just before going there. But mostly because it is a wonderful country. Transportation was spectacularly efficient, people were friendly and welcoming, food was delicious and prices were very reasonable. If I had to recommend top countries purely for their wildlife-watching potential, Japan would

not be high on the list. But if there are folks who want to combine great food and awe-inspiring historical sites with some wildlife, Japan is hard to beat.

As always, please feel free to contact me at [ibtson@yahoo.com](mailto:ibtson@yahoo.com) with any questions or requests for more information.

Ian Thompson

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List of mammals seen:

1. Japanese Macaque – *Macaca fuscata*
2. Ryuku Flying Fox – *Pteropus dasymallus*
3. Greater (Japanese) Horseshoe Bat – *Rhinolophus ferrumequinum nippon*
4. Amami Rabbit – *Pentalagus furnessi*
5. Japanese Squirrel – *Sciurus lis*
6. Japanese Giant Flying Squirrel – *Petaurista leucogenys*
7. Red Fox – *Vulpes vulpes*
8. Japanese Raccoon Dog (Tanuki) – *Nyctereutes viverrinus*
9. Common Raccoon – *Procyon lotor*
10. Japanese Marten – *Martes melampus*
11. Japanese Badger – *Meles anakuma*
12. Masked Palm Civet – *Paguma larvata*
13. Japanese (Sika) Deer – *Cervus nippon*
14. Eurasian Wild Pig – *Sus scrofa*
15. Japanese Serow – *Capricornis crispus*