

FLYFISHING JAPAN

Nick Taransky discovered plenty of surprises and quite a few delights in this epicentre of Eastern flyfishing.



I'd had a superficial understanding of Japanese flyfishing for ages. I knew the Japanese made quality fly hooks and other fly tying materials and tackle. Fishing-wise, I was aware of a pretty native salmonid called a cherry salmon, and I had a mental picture of the fishing being overcrowded and limited.

It was only when a mate showed me a copy of the Japanese magazine *FlyFisher* (www.e-tsuribito.jp/pages/magazine/flyfisher), that I began to see how wrong I had been. I ordered as many copies of back issues as I could, from Amazon Japan (they have an English option for viewing the site) and I spent many nights pawing over them. Gradually I learned that Japan had a serious fresh and saltwater flyfishing scene that seemed to be accompanied by elegant, sophisticated angling and fly dressing techniques. The magazine's photography, particularly that of Ken Tsurusaki, was like nothing I had seen in the West, with a unique eye for artistic expression and originality. (Interestingly, *FlyFisher* contained no articles or references to Tenkara – it appeared dedicated Japanese fly anglers saw it as a totally different method.)





In the saltwater articles, I recognised many species found in Australia, or at least relatives of them – even a fish almost identical to our barramundi, Akame (*Lates japonicas*). In freshwater, there were several native and introduced salmonids, plus American largemouth bass and panfish. Carp and other familiar (and unfamiliar) species were also being caught on fly. And those who have seen Nick Reygaert's new film 'Predator' will know that Hokkaido, the northernmost of the main islands, is home to a type of taimen, the Ito (*Hucho perryi*).

But for me, a devoted small stream angler, the stories about stream fishing for native salmonids were the most appealing. In some ways, the pictures reminded me of favourite Snowy Mountains creeks, but in others, the vivid greens, Japanese vegetation and ice blue water were quite exotic. The fish too, which included Yamame (landlocked

cherry salmon) and Iwana (a char like a brookie), were both somewhat familiar, but with a unique beauty. To top it off, I could see there were many skilled bamboo rod makers in Japan. There was no question, I had to go there!

Through Japan FlyFisher, I began to correspond with Tomonori 'Bill' Higashi, a leading identity in Japanese flyfishing. Higashi-san is on the FFF Fly Casting Board of Governors, has worked as an interpreter for Mel Krieger, and has fished with many flyfishing legends including Rene Harrop and John Gierach (having translated some of their works into Japanese). His favorite international angling destination is the Florida Keys tarpon fishery, but it seems he has fished pretty much everywhere else I can think of too. As well traveled as he is, Higashi-san is also a proud but humble ambassador for Japanese flyfishing. Thankfully, his English was much better than my Japanese. He was extremely helpful in organising a detailed itinerary for my visit, including meetings with Japanese rod makers

and other tackle craftsmen – and plenty of fishing opportunities too of course.

My first trip was planned for May 2011, but only weeks before we were due to leave the devastating Tohoku earthquake and tsunami put that trip out of the question (see Fact File). We rescheduled for May 2012, and this time everything went to plan. It was truly a life-changing trip and I can highly recommend visiting Japan to Australian fly anglers. I know that Christopher Bassano (www.rainbowlodgetasmania.com.au) is taking groups there annually, and with some research and planning, solo trips would be very achievable too. My own trip was shared between meeting Japanese rod makers, some general sightseeing, and fishing. My column elsewhere in this issue focuses on the rod making side of things, so here I will cover travel and the fishing.



The Fishery

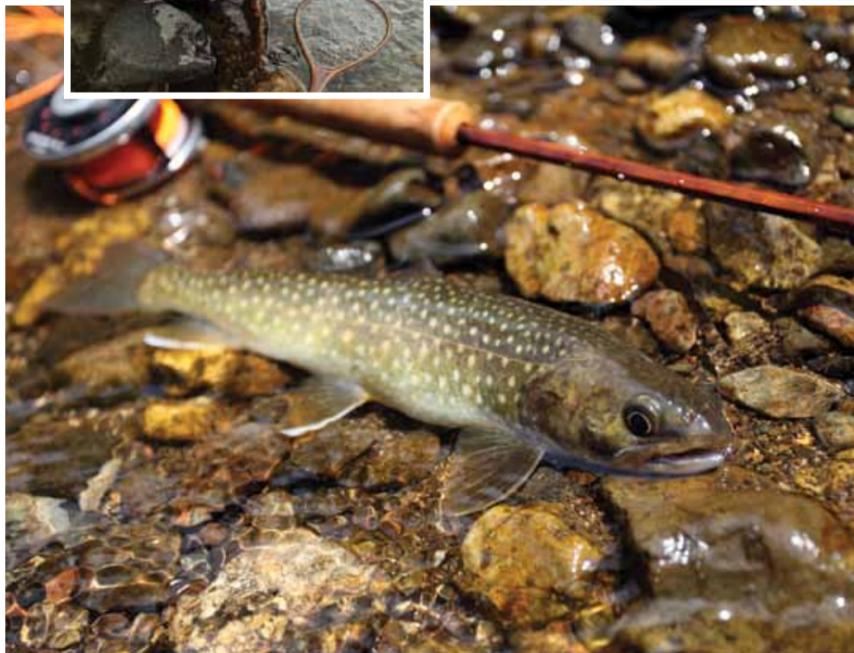
Our fishing was centered in the north of Honshu, on small to medium-sized streams in the Akita and Iwate prefectures. The species of fish we targeted were Yamame and Iwana. In general, these are not large fish as per many small streams back here in the Snowy Mountains. In most streams a 12 inch is considered large, though with the help of local guides we did catch a couple of fish in the 13–14 inch class. Even the smaller fish though were no pushovers, and at times, very challenging – too smart for me anyway! The beauty of the fish and their environment, the technical nature of the fishing and the company of new fishing mates made the overall experience as memorable as any I've experienced.

At the risk of oversimplification, I can sum up the fishery in comparison to others that may be more familiar. The stream appearance and water clarity was similar to some New Zealand beech forest waters (with much smaller fish) and the technical fishing could be likened to that on some heavily fished American rivers. The scenery was spectacular and my trip in May/June coincided with what seemed to be a thousand shades of spring green.

Most rivers had a natural feel to them, but I suppose because of the high population and use of water, signs of mankind such as weirs and stone retaining walls were visible here and there. These were well established and often overgrown, so to me they were all part of the landscape and in some ways added to the overall experience.

Compared to my home waters in the Snowys, the rivers we fished tended to have significantly higher flows and steeper gradients. There were often several current lanes across the river, with different current speeds or complex braided flows providing a real challenge in managing a drag-free drift.

Fishing regulations are administered from valley to valley, which can be quite confusing. Some rivers we fished had no regulations at all, while others required a day licence at a cost equivalent to about 8 to 12 Aussie dollars. These were available from a local konbini or other store, and in one case a barber shop! Though we did see the odd angler here and there, and there is evidently some fishing pressure, I didn't sense any real competition for angling locations during our stay. Most days we fished without seeing another angler.



One day we were joined by photographer Ken Tsurusaki (www.kentsurusaki.com). It was an honor to meet him and it was amazing to watch him at work. He is an incredible artist and a master of his craft. I have a better understanding now of the difference between being a true photographer, and a fisherman with lots of camera gear!

Yamame and Iwana

Japan has several salmonids, and some of these have many subspecies (Iwana alone have over 60 described subspecies and more are still being identified). The two dominant species in Japanese fishing however, for the purposes of describing habits and techniques, are the Yamame and Iwana.

Yamame, in Japanese, means 'Mountain Lady'. Higashi-san told me at the outset to think of the habits of the Yamame as being somewhat like a rainbow, holding in the main current, often in or just off the strong main current seam, at the heads of pools. They tend to feed most confidently in overcast conditions.

Visually, Yamame are as beautiful as the meaning of their name. Although a brief look confirms that this species is a relative of the rainbow trout family, there are some charming differences. They have a green/grey back peppered with dark green, almost black rainbow trout-like spots. Yamame retain large grey parr marks right through to adulthood over pale, silvery flanks. There's a hint of a pale pink rainbow slash along the lateral line, with a silky white

belly. In contrast to this delicate coloring, even a 10 or 12 inch Yamame has a chisel-sharp nose with fine teeth, giving it the mean look of a big Pacific king salmon.

The Iwana, Higashi-san said, though a char could be thought of more like a brown, hugging the edges of the bank, tight against rocks and undercuts, and preferring secondary flows and back eddies. I was amazed to watch these Iwana on station. Their pale silhouette would reveal their dorsal fin right on the surface, as they lay only an inch or so from undercut rock, almost like they had been stapled there. Iwana have a preference for brighter conditions than Yamame, which is helpful when fishing to them, as their preferred lies present more sight fishing opportunities than the Yamame. To me, the Iwana were spectacular to look at – certainly the name 'rock fish' doesn't do them justice. The overall patterning follows that of a brook trout, but the colour tones are unique (and the shades vary from stream to stream). The variegated greens on the back and dorsal fin give way to pale turquoise blue and orange spots on grey-brown flanks, and then apricot bellies, with the classic white-fringed lower fins of a char. As much as I loved the look of Yamame, I don't think I've ever seen a more gorgeous fish than the Iwana. Except maybe a brown trout!

Higashi-san's advice on the differences in behavior between Yamame and Iwana was excellent. It held true to the point where our guide would tell us which fish we would catch from a given lie. Both fish had their own challenges when it came to presentation. For Yamame, it was managing a fast, drag free drift in heavy water, and responding to the fast roll on the fly with a lightning fast strike. Because of their preference for deeper lies and cloudy conditions, much of the fishing to Yamame was done blind, so the take and ejection of the fly was often over in a flash. For Iwana, the challenge was in presenting a drag free drift – often across several strong current



lines – to a back eddy, slack water or undercut. The rise was slower than that of a Yamame, but the strike still had to be immediately after the fly was taken. Both species were sensitive to poor presentation and drag, and the larger fish usually only gave you one chance to get it right. I often didn't, but there was always another opportunity close by...

Techniques and Tackle

All of our fishing was with a single dry fly, sometimes matching specific insects (mayflies, caddis or terrestrials); sometimes with generic patterns. I fished a little on my own, but usually in the company Higashi-san or one of two local rod makers, Naoto Shibuya and Kazuaki Kikuchi. I wanted to learn as much as I could from these experts so I tried to follow their instructions where possible rather than fishing exactly as I would back home.

At least the general approach was familiar. We fished our way upstream, and usually we cast upstream; sometimes across or even a little down, depending on the strength and complexity of the water flow and lies (or fish) being fished to. The fish were definitely angler shy, but our guides seemed comfortable approaching fish maybe a little closer and more from upstream than I expected. This may have been due to the strong flows and perhaps steep banks and cover from a canopy of trees reducing the issue of silhouetting.

Meanwhile, the fishing styles of Kikuchi-san and Shibuya-san were sufficiently different to warrant separate discussion.

Fishing Short

Kikuchi-san fished in a way I could relate to. Using a 7½ foot 4 weight bamboo rod and a leader of around 10 feet, he made accurate, short to medium casts to fish he could see, or to fish likely lies. Casts were typically 10 to 20 feet from the rod tip. Like all the Japanese anglers I saw his casting was superb – very smooth and controlled. He used underpowered curve and crumpled leader casts to produce drag-free drifts, recasting often in the cascading pocket water we often fished.

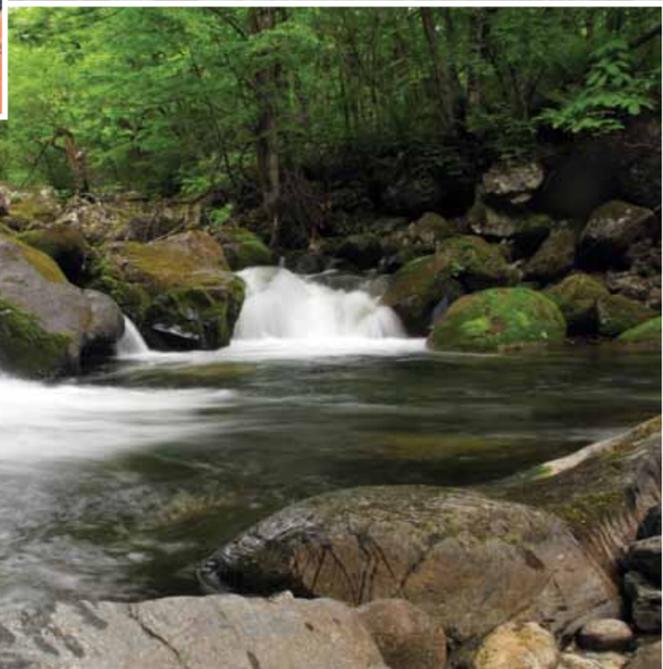
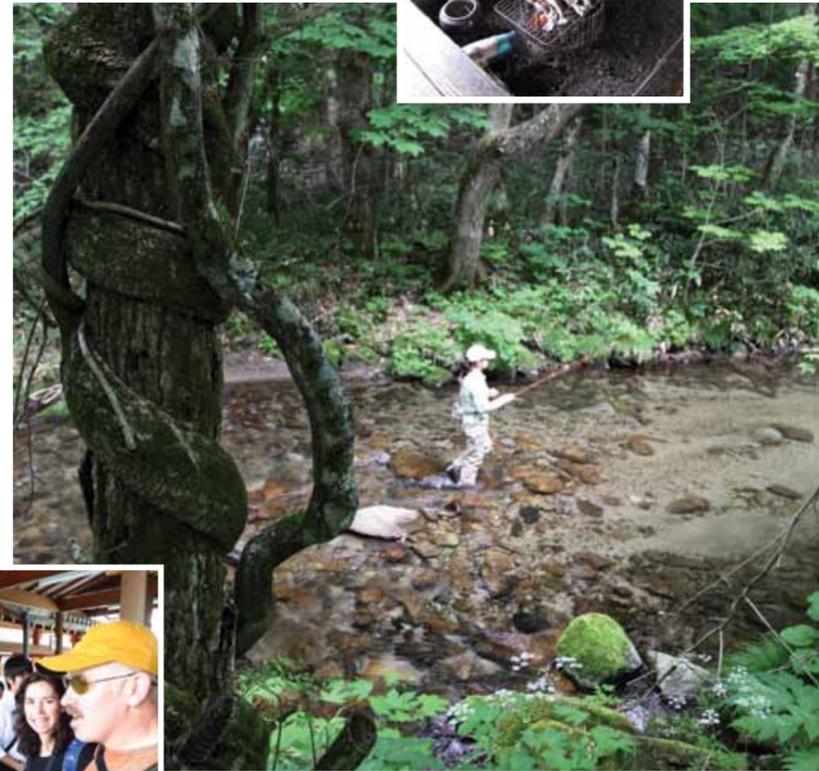
Subtle reach and mend casts were used to manage the line and defeat drag. Rather than mend a great deal after casting, he 'high-sticked' the fly line off the water, using the rod and his arm at full extension to leave only part of the leader in contact with the surface. (Those who've tried Tenkara fishing will be able to identify with this.) The method was very effective in the tight, tumbling pocket water streams, where trees and steep valley walls help mask the angler. At other times, when conditions allowed (or dictated) Kikuchi-san would stay low and use the cover of boulders to approach the water, then employ a low side cast to present the fly. In contrast to his traditional rod and reel, his choice of fly was a modern foam ant with a small white wing and bright orange butt. This fly floated low, but it also floated all day, and with the black/white/orange colour, it remained visible in sun, shade or dappled light.

LDL

If Kikuchi-san was worth watching to pick up subtle points in the execution of familiar techniques, then Shibuya-san may as well have been from another planet! I knew long drift/long leader methods were used in Japan, but Shibuya-san has taken these to such an extreme, he has designed his own range of rods, leaders and lines to extend this Long Drift Leader (LDL) style. Shibuya-san has made three DVDs, written a book and many magazine articles on the technique, so it is impossible to cover it in a few paragraphs, but I can at least provide an outline.

In simple terms, the approach is to use long leaders (often over 20 feet), including a very thin butt and up to 7 feet of tippet, cast in a controlled curve and/or crumple, to defeat drag in very

complex current flows, thus achieving very long drag-free drifts in what seem like impossible lies. In stark contrast to Euro Nymphing, where a long leader is used but kept tight and at full extension, these LDL leaders when presented collapse right down, such that in some circumstances, a 22 foot leader may



present the fly only a few feet from the tip of the fly line. With all the available slack in the leader, it allows for an incredible amount of mending after the cast has been made.

Shibuya-san was unbelievable to watch. He could cast across a raging rapid 20 feet wide, and keep the fly sitting stationary on a bathtub-size corner of slack water on the other side. Or, he might keep the fly gently drifting drag-free in a back eddy for ages, continually mending the line with an array of stacks, flips, rolls, lifts and reaches.

While it's one thing to crumple the leader, it is another to do it in a controlled way so you still put the fly down with dinner-plate (or smaller) accuracy at the same time. If this sounds difficult, it is! Shibuya-san doesn't speak a lot of English, but I gave him plenty of opportunity to practice as he tried to guide me on to the next sweet spot: "Mo left, mo left. Mo right. Mo left. Ohhhh!... Spook... Next fish." I hope that I improved under his tutelage. I'm still practicing back home but have quite a way to go to be repeatedly proficient.

LDL is a challenge and very rewarding when it comes together. The cast that is needed is a deep 'rat's nose'. It has a dead straight top leg, which provides the accuracy. The front of the loop then drops down into a V on the lower leg, forming a triangular wedge. It's an odd looking cast to start with, but it provides amazing control and line speed too, with delicate delivery of the fly. How to form the cast is a subject for another day...

With such a long, light leader, fly design is very important. To start with, this is a dry fly technique. Anything heavily hackled and wind resistant can spin like a top, and tangle the leader before you know it. A fly with too much weight will be difficult to stop turning over too far. CDC flies are very well suited to this approach, satisfying

both criteria. CDC-friendly floatant (such as Shimazaki spray) is applied sparingly – just to the wing, with the hook and body masked out by pinching between the fingers. The hooks are fine wire like the Tiemco 212Y, designed to pin the fast-taking Yamame.

Another tackle consideration for this LDL fishing is choice of rod. Regardless of whether it is graphite, cane or glass (there are rods of all materials that are suitable) they have to be full flexing in order to form the right loop shape and to support all the mends after the initial casts. Shibuya-san's bamboo rods are developed for this style of fishing (read about them in my column) and he has also developed a range of glass rods for Tiemco as well: the Glass Master series. Because of the power needed in the cast and mending, these rods tend to be 3 or 4 weights and 7 to 8 foot.

Shibuya-san is renowned for catching very large Yamame and Iwana from hard-fished Japanese waters. I think the method (possibly scaled down a little because of our lower flows) has fantastic potential for tricky browns in some Australian streams.

FACT FILE



TRAVEL

Higashi-san traveled with me for the majority of the trip so most of the details were organised in advance. We traveled mainly by train (including the 'Shinkansen' bullet trains) from region to region, and from there we went either by train or in the car of a host or guide. Japan Rail offers very economical one and two-week rail passes for foreign visitors. The Japanese drive on the left (thankfully!) and their reputation for good manners and tolerance seems to extend to the roads too. If planning a road trip, Japan has an excellent network of freeways, though tolls can be very high.

Despite my preconception that Japan would be an expensive destination, I was pleasantly surprised by the overall cost of travel, accommodation and food – particularly if you eat local food and stay away from the high end of town. In regional areas, local inns are very economical and include breakfast and dinner in the tariff. They also have a charm and character which feels more authentic than standard hotels. Guiding prices too seemed to be very reasonable by international standards.

In addition to the fishing, there are many attractions you can experience on a visit to Japan. Temples, gardens, the massive Tsukichi Fish Markets in Tokyo and other tourist destinations are well worth a detour. However the nice thing about being an angler is you will get to see much of the 'real' Japan that the average tourist may miss out on.

FACT FILE

LANGUAGE & CULTURE

Such was my fascination with Japan that in early 2011 I decided to start learning Japanese, partly to get maximum immersion in the culture on my visit, and partly just for the fun and challenge of it. Though not essential for a trip to Japan, for me it really added to the experience and I think the people I met appreciated my attempts at speaking Japanese. Most people in Tokyo and other cities speak at least some English, but in the rural areas (where the fishing is best) fluency falls away quickly. Still, people are very friendly and helpful and tackling the language barrier is all part of the fun of travel I guess!

The people in Japan were so incredibly friendly and polite it made me feel like I could move there permanently. Even in Tokyo and other cities where things were bustling, there was an absence of impatience or hostility.

Japan has a very complex hierarchy of social interaction, with many levels of politeness. As a Westerner, you aren't expected to know these and are forgiven for transgressions but any attempts you can make to fit in are appreciated. It's worth reading up a little and practicing some basics like greetings, and how to say please, thank you, and sorry! And if you visit an Onsen (public hot-spring bath) which is highly recommended, wash yourself from head to toe BEFORE you get in. Giving small gifts is a lovely part of Japanese culture, so if you go there it's nice to have plenty of uniquely Australian flies or other small items with you to share.

Summing Up

My head – and a packed diary/journal – are full of ideas and information from my visit and I've only scratched the surface here. I'm already planning my next trip. There is so much to learn from Japan, and it is a fantastic destination for so many other reasons too. I owe Higashi-san a great deal for organising my visit, and I hope to show him some of our fishing in the future. Kensuke Yagi, Chief Editor of Japan FlyFisher, and many others too were incredibly helpful and generous. The anglers I met were all passionate, skillful, sharing and humble. When visiting the studio of Kenshiro Shimazaki, I noticed a cutting from a magazine on his wall. It read 'Man's passion whirls on the other side of the beautiful world.' I can't think of a better way to sum up my first trip to the Land of the Rising Sun.



FACT FILE FOOD

We all recognise Japanese food like sushi, and while you will have no trouble finding this in Japan, there is a lot more to Japanese food. Noodles, including ramen, soba and udon – often in soups, are very common. Most regions have particular dishes and styles of food they are known for, so it's a good idea to take advantage of this. Except maybe in Sendai, where beef tongue is the specialty! And try fugu (deadly puffer fish) at your own risk.

In the north of the main island of Honshu, where we spent most of our time, much of the diet consists of shoots, leaves, roots and other vegetables picked from the hillsides. These were delicious (oishii). The low fat/sugar Japanese diet is very healthy. I ate a lot on my trip, and drank plenty of beer, sake and shochu (Japanese vodka) but still managed to lose about 3 kilos in less than three weeks.



Local food was very economical and even seafood cost no more than you would expect to pay in Australia. Convenience stores (called 'konbini') have a large variety of food and drink (including all types of alcohol) at very low prices. I know some

Aussies on a budget that can exist entirely on konbini food! Western-style foods of various types can usually be found too. There are some weird and wonderful names to go with some drinks, in particular: Calpis Water (yogurt drink), Creap (powdered coffee whitener) and my favorite – Pocari Sweat (sports drink).



FACT FILE



THE TŌHOKU TSUNAMI/EARTHQUAKE

Many thousands of survivors remain affected by this disaster and they will continue to be affected for years to come. One of our hosts took us to some coastal towns that were wiped away by the tsunami, which struck in March 2011. What were once seaside fishing towns are now huge empty plains, punctuated by mountains of bulldozed wreckage and rubble. The scale was overwhelming to see at the time and will stay in my memory forever. I can't imagine what it would be like to have your entire town, your family, and nearly everyone you know taken from you in a single event. However it is a testimony to the resilience and spirit of the Japanese people that they are working hard to rebuild their communities, despite the threat of more earthquakes, tsunamis and the spectre of radioactive fallout from Fukushima. Of course, the threat to visitors is negligible, and visiting the country as a whole and perhaps parts of the affected regions, is one way of helping the recovering economy through tourism dollars.

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