

IBAs of the rising sun

Title To view the **original PDF** of this World Birdwatch article, [click here](#). The volcanic island of Miyake-jima lies 180 km south of Tokyo, in Japan's Izu island group. One of 167 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in Japan, the Miyake Island Sanctuary is home to four globally Vulnerable species: Japanese Murrelet *Synthliboramphus wumizusume*, Izu Thrush *Turdus celanops*, Pleske's Grasshopper-warbler *Locustella pleskei* and Izu Leaf-warbler *Phylloscopus ijimae*. The Wild Bird Society of Japan (WBSJ, BirdLife Partner) has taken the lead in conserving Miyake since 1993. Formed in 1934, WBSJ has over 45,000 members and 90 chapters throughout Japan. Local Conservation Groups (LCGs) are active at 147 IBAs. LCGs consist of volunteers who work for the conservation of their local IBAs, receiving support and training from WBSJ. WBSJ's mission is to protect birds and their habitat, to encourage more people to enjoy bird watching and to carry out research concerning the status and habitat of birds. Its activities have included gathering data for the Asian IBAs and Red Data Book programmes and helping to raise funds for these projects. As well as conservation and advocacy work within Japan, WBSJ has supported and funded conservation work in other Asian countries. For example, with Chinese Wild Bird Federation (CWBF; BirdLife in Taiwan) and Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (HKBWS, BirdLife Partner), WBSJ has identified a number of important sites for Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor* in China. At the international level, WBSJ works with BirdLife's Asia Division for the identification of marine IBAs, and with RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) for species-related research. Beginning in the 1980s, WBSJ pioneered the establishment of sanctuaries as an approach to conservation in Japan. The Ministry of Environment and local governments have also adopted this approach. Today, Japan has around 600 sanctuaries which are managed by local government and non-governmental organisations. WBSJ's Sanctuary Division looks after ten sanctuaries in Japan, eight of which are independently managed by WBSJ, while two are funded by local governments. Varying from 7.5 to 511 ha in size, the sanctuaries are all IBAs. The division has a total of 44 rangers with two to four rangers assigned to each sanctuary. The Miyake-jima IBA and sanctuary covers 5,500 ha. The sanctuary's nature centre is known as Akakokko-kan, after the local name for the Izu Thrush. Each year, after a presentation by WBSJ on the accomplishments of the centre, a memorandum of agreement is signed with local government for WBSJ's continued management of Akakokko-kan. WBSJ has a separate office on Miyake Island to handle conservation research on bird species such as the Japanese Murrelet. American marine biologist Dr. Jack Moyer was instrumental in raising local awareness about conserving Miyake. He came to the island as a US serviceman in 1952 and persuaded the US government to end practice bombings on the nearby uninhabited island of Onohara-jima, an important Japanese Murrelet breeding site. The Japanese Murrelet became the flagship species for the BirdLife Partner's marine conservation project on WBSJ's 75th anniversary in 2009. WBSJ did the first survey of the murrelet on Onohara-jima in 1995. Since 2009, with the help of LCG members, the surveys have been extended across the Izu islands. As a result of this research, in November 2010 the Ministry of Environment declared Onohara-jima a special wildlife protection area. By early 2012, WBSJ was able to

confirm that the Izu islands held the second most important population of the Japanese Murrelet, with at least 1,000 individuals out of a global total of 5,000-10,000 birds (See news story, p.6). Dr Moyer lived on Miyake for the next 50 years and since his death in 2004 remains an inspiration to conservationists on the island. Through Akakokko-kan, WBSJ continues what Dr Moyer started, with conservation research, environmental education and ecotourism promotion. Akakokko-kan serves as the coordinator for local government, LCGs and local people in sharing information and addressing matters that affect the biodiversity of the island. The Tomonokai and Kyururu LCGs enable WBSJ to achieve far more on Miyake than the BirdLife Partner's staff would be able to manage unaided. The LCGs collaborate with Akakokko-kan without any formal arrangement or agreements. They receive training in conservation research and tour guiding and, in return, take part in Akakokko-kan's research and conservation projects and advocacy work. The Tomonokai LCG consists of enthusiasts whose primary objective is to enjoy nature. The activities of Tomonokai's 100-plus members include monitoring the island's biodiversity. They have reported an improvement in the island's vegetation cover since the volcanic eruption in 2000 as well as an increase in the Izu Leaf-warbler population. Tomonokai members trained at the Akakokko-kan centre are involved in the Japanese Murrelet survey. For two days every year, during the breeding season, they also carry out a survey of the Izu Thrush population. The surveys began in 2008 when the population was estimated at 4,400 individuals. Since the population of Izu Thrush had never been counted before, this figure will serve as a baseline for future monitoring and conservation work. The Kyururu LCG is named after the sound made by the Akakokko (Izu Thrush). Begun in 2006 as a circle of friends eager to learn about Miyake, the LCG has evolved into a tour-guiding group. Following training by Akakokko-kan, there are now five part-time nature guides active on the island, all of whom plan to go full-time. One member has established a company, Mahana, through which these guides offer their services. Three or four fisherman take tourists to see the Japanese Murrelets, and Akakokko-kan has transferred the operation of these tours to a member of Kyururu. Kyururu members take part in the Japanese Murrelet survey. Kyururu members are also very active via the internet, raising concerns among the wider public about the construction of roads and dams on the island. LCG members pass on their concerns about such infrastructure projects to Akakokko-kan, which relays them to the relevant authorities, helping to overcome the perceived lack of consultation with local people about such projects. Through Akakokko-kan, WBSJ also works with local individuals like Mr. Hiroo Kitagawa, a fisherman, boat captain and environmentalist inspired by Dr. Moyer. Mr Kitagawa is currently researching the Japanese Murrelet for the Ministry of Environment, advising Akakokko-kan in their research and conservation work for the species. According to Mr Kitagawa, other local fishermen have begun to understand the importance of conserving the Japanese Murrelet because they gain additional income by providing their boats for the tours initiated by Akakokko-kan. Mr Kitagawa believes that over-fishing, particularly by foreign owned vessels, is a threat to the Japanese Murrelet and to other marine wildlife around Miyake. "The conservation efforts of the LCGs have contributed to the improvement of Miyake's biodiversity, with stable bird populations, increased vegetation cover and improved marine ecosystem conditions", said Hidenori Shinoke-san. "Their work has led to a heightened awareness and appreciation of the Izu Thrush and Japanese Murrelet among the local people and the promotion of ecotourism in the island to improve their livelihoods. The LCG approach has led to good governance of Miyake Island IBA in the sense of increased and enhanced participation in conservation." WBSJ has taken local people from a variety of backgrounds, with different interests, experience and expertise, providing them with the skills they need to monitor the islands biodiversity and to develop sustainable livelihoods. The LCGs also have the potential to help WBSJ to manage the IBA. Ultimately, WBSJ's objective is for these local people to manage and conserve the Miyake sanctuary on their own. *By Mithi Laya S. Gonzales and Hidenori Shinoke* **To view the original PDF of this World Birdwatch article,**

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