Asian Stubtail

**Yabusame (Jpn)**

**Urosphena squameiceps**

### Morphology and classification

**Classification:** Passeriformes Cettidae

- Total length: 105mm
- Wing length: ♀ 52.7±1.2mm (n=64) ♂ 51.5±1.2mm (56)
- Tail length: ♀ 29.4±1.1mm (64) ♂ 28.7±0.9mm (56)
- Culmen length: ♀ 10.4±0.5mm (64) ♂ 10.3±0.5mm (56)
- Tarsus length: ♀ 19.2±0.4mm (64) ♂ 19.1±0.6mm (56)
- Weight: ♀ 9.3±0.6g (63) ♂ 9.3±0.6g (27)

The total length after Enomoto (1941), and other measurements by the author. The male statistically shows significantly larger values in the mean lengths of natural wing and tail. But the difference may not be always distinct (Kawaji 1995).

### Appearance:

The male and female Asian Stubtails are similar in plumage coloration. They are brown all over, but paler on the underpart than the upperpart. The crown looks scally due to the dark edges of feathers (Photo. 1). They have a distinct pale brown superciliary. After fledging, the juveniles molt into adult plumage in a short period of time, which makes it difficult to distinguish between juveniles and adults by plumage coloration (Kawaji & Hirokawa 1998).

### Vocalization:

Once males arrive at the breeding grounds, they sing their cricket-like diatonic song of "shee-shee-shee-shee" with rising intonation. The common call of the male and female sounds like "Chott-chott-chott" as in Winter Wrens. When they are alarmed, they call "Bich-bich-bich" or make a metallic sound like "chott-chott" as in Winter Wrens. When they are alarmed, they call "Bich-bich-bich" or make a metallic sound like "chott-chott" as in Winter Wrens.

### Distribution and Habitat

**Distribution:** As a summer resident, Asian Stubtails visit Japan (to the north of Yakushima Island, Kagoshima Pref., southern Japan). They also breed in northeastern China, the Korean Peninsula, the Ussuri region, Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands. They generally migrate to southwestern China, Taiwan and the Indo-China Peninsula in winter, but some of them winter in the Amami Islands and the Okinawa Islands as well.

**Habitat:** In the breeding season, Asian Stubtails are usually found in a broad-leaved or mixed forest with the under-growth of Sasa spp. (bamboo grass) or various shrubs and a thick litter layer on the ground. They occasionally stop over in parks of urban areas while on migration.

### Breeding system:

They are basically monogamous, but can be polygamous (Kawaji et al. 1995).

### Nest:

Male Asian Stubtails visit the study site (Hitsujigaoka Experimental forest, Sapporo, Hokkaido) in late April every year and claim the territory, singing vigorously at the top of a tall tree for a while. Some males sing a distinct song at night right after arrival in some areas (Masayoshi Kamioki pers. comm.). A male has about 0.5ha singing area on average. The study of the difference in arrival date between the male and female of a pair showed that females arrived about ten days later than males. When a male pairs up with a female passing through the territory, the male moves around with the female. About 12 days later, the female begins to build a nest and the male starts to sing on the ground, instead of in treetops. It is females that build a nest. It takes about five days on average to complete it. They usually build a cup-shaped nest on the ground. They lay grass fibers and fallen leaves and animal fur in the inner cup. They often use fallen leaves with only veins for the exterior. The nest is 54mm in diameter on the inside and 38mm in depth. In the study site of Hitsujigaoka, for instance, they usually build a nest in a space under the fallen leaves lifted from the ground by Sasa grass bended under the weight of snow, when the bamboo grass rises again after the snow has melted. They sometimes use as a nest site the fork of the roots at the base of a large tree and a hollow on a slope in the woods as well. There was a pair which built a nest in a hollow of a birch tree trunk at a height of 1.3m above the ground, which is an exception.

### Egg:

Asian Stubtails generally breed more than once in a breeding period. The clutch size was six eggs from every nest in May, but it decreased to 5.4 eggs after June in the study site of Hitsujigaoka, Sapporo. The eggs have red flecks on a white ground (Photo 2). They are 1.5cm by 1cm and about 1g in weight. During the egg-laying period, females visit their nest and lay an egg early in the morning every day. After laying, however, they leave the nest and do not return until the following morning.

### Incubation and nestling periods and fledging success:

Completing the clutch, females start incubating immediately, but males do not take part in the incubation. The incubation and nestling periods and fledging success:

- Incubation period: 17-18 days
- Nestling period: 12-14 days
- Fledging success: About 80%

### Life history

- Migration: breeding period
- Wintering period: migration breeding period

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**Fig. 1.** Sonagram of Asian Stubtail song. [Mutsuyuki Ueta]

**Photo 1.** Asian Stubtail. [Ryozo Yamada]

**Photo 2.** Nest and eggs

**Photo 3.** Nestlings and eggs

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http://www.bird-research.jp/1_shiryo/koe/yabusame_060526_tanzawa.mp3

Kyoko Kajimoto
ing periods are 13 and 10 days, respectively. Females continue to incubate the nestlings for about eight days after hatching. While females incubate the eggs, males visit the nest exclusively to feed females only once or twice a day. Females leave the nest to feed once an hour for about 20 minutes. After the nestlings have hatched, males take full responsibility for feeding them, while females brood them except when they occasionally leave the nest to feed. The diet of the nestlings consists primarily of larvae of lepidoptera (caterpillars), followed by spiders and flies (diptera). The male parent mostly takes care of the fledglings because the female usually attempts the second breeding several days after the young have fledged. The juveniles learn to forage for food by themselves about 10 days after fledging. In the Hitsujigakoka study site, the hatching success was 89% and fledgling success was 80% which was higher than in other areas (Hitoshi Enomoto). The common predators for the Asian Stubtail are green tree snakes and foxes. But in the study site, few nests fell victim to carnivorous mammals which may explain the high fledgling success in this site. A dense thicket of bamboo grass probably prevented predatory mammals from gaining access to Asian Stubtail nests.

### Literature


### Author

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I studied the breeding ecology of Asian Stubtails for about six years when I lived in Sapporo before. While struggling with a dense thicket of bamboo grass in the experimental forest of the office every day I collected many interesting data on the species. I did not find any good study sites for Asian Stubtails after I had left Sapporo. When I returned to Sapporo after a dozen years and observed breeding Asian Stubtails, I realized the charm of this big-eyed little bird again. I feel that Asian Stubtails are still full of riddles to be solved.

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**Photo 4.** A pair of Asian Stubtails feeding the nestlings.

**Photo 5.** Arrows show the nest owner male (middle) and female (right) in the nest and a visitor male (upper left). (From the video image by Masayoshi Kamioki.)