

A Nature Reserve Where Rare Red- crowned Cranes Nest Year-Round



Photo: Kushiro City

The Kushiho Crane Reserve was established through a municipal public-private partnership.

The red-crowned crane that also called “Japanese crane”¹ was once on the verge of extinction, but in 1958 a nature reserve for this rare species was established in Hokkaido, with the aim of protecting and propagating it. We interviewed reserve staff about the ecology of red-crowned cranes and the reserve’s activities.
(Text: Tanaka Nozomi)



Photo: PIXTA

A family of red-crowned cranes flying in formation



Photo: Kushiro City

A red-crowned crane chick covered with brown downy hair



Photo: Kushiro City

Inside the Kushiro Crane Reserve, leaving Red-crowned cranes to roam at will in a wetland that measures 180m north-south and 340m east-west.

In the eastern part of Hokkaido, the northernmost prefecture of the Japanese archipelago, about a 10-minute drive from Tancho Kushiro Airport, there is a nature reserve where red-crowned cranes are bred. We asked Takashima Kenji, the staff of the Kushiro Crane Reserve in Kushiro City about the reserve's activities.

"The Kushiro Crane Reserve was established specifically for the red-crowned crane, which is one of the rarest species in the world. Here, we achieved the world's first successful artificial hatching of Japanese red-crowned cranes in 1970. The nature reserve offers visitors the opportunity to observe the red-crowned crane, a species designated as a special natural monument, at any time of the year. Chicks are born annually from April to June, and visitors can also watch the cranes raise their young," says Takashima.

Until the mid-19th century, there were wetlands all over Hokkaido, and the red-crowned crane was not a rare species. However, in the late second half of the 19th century, as part of Japan's modernization efforts, land cultivation advanced and wetlands were converted to farmland. Combined with overhunting, these developments pushed the red-crowned crane to the brink of extinction within 20 to 30 years. By the 1910s, they had disappeared from view and were considered to be extinct. But in 1924 more than a dozen were discovered in Kushiro Marsh. In response, the following year the area was declared a no-hunting zone and a national conservation policy was initiated. The red-crowned crane is the only crane species that breeds in Japan. It is a rare species with a total population of about 3,000 birds worldwide, more than half of which live primarily in the eastern part of Hokkaido."

The red-crowned crane was designated a national natural treasure in 1935 and a special natural treasure of Japan, as a nationally protected species, in 1967. Local people also began conservation activities more

than 80 years ago, and their work led to the opening of the Kushiro Crane Reserve in 1958 in cooperation with Kushiro City. "We keep and breed more than a dozen red-crowned cranes at any given time, and when their numbers in the reserve increase, we release some into the wild. We also protect the eggs in incubators to increase the hatching rate."

According to Mr. Takashima, who is in close contact with red-crowned cranes for the purpose of breeding them, "The charm of red-crowned cranes lies not only in their beautiful appearance, but also in their human-like behavior. For example, when they peck for food, they look around cautiously as if they were humans. The contrast between their graceful appearance and their human-like behavior is fascinating."

A particularly large number of overseas visitors to the nature reserve come from East Asia. "The red-crowned crane is considered a lucky animal in Asia, so they seem to enjoy it a lot," says Takashima.

The nature reserve has information brochures in English, Chinese, Korean, and other languages to accommodate overseas visitors.

"The red-crowned cranes that soar gracefully over the wetlands are the pride of our homeland. We cherish them and commit to continue our efforts to breed them." The Kushiro Crane Reserve is a rare place where visitors can observe the red-crowned crane, a natural monument of Japan, up close, and is well worth a visit if the opportunity arises. 📷



Red-crowned cranes in a snowy landscape

Photo: Kushiro City

1. The red-crowned crane is also known as "Japanese crane" in English. Its Latin-based scientific name is *Grus japonensis*, which also means "Japanese crane."