

With over 250 bird species recorded, an important stopover for migratory birds. The first bird sanctuary in Japan

## Utonai-ko

## Freshwater Lake, Low Moor

Geographical Coordinates: 42°42'N, 141°43'E / Altitude: 1-5m / Area: 510ha / Major Type of Wetland: Freshwater lakes, low moors / Designation: Special Protection Area of National Wildlife Protection Area / Municipalities Involved: Tomakomai City, Hokkaido Prefecture / Ramsar Designation: December 1991



A full view of Utonai-ko

Staging and wintering ground for waterbirds



The nature center



Medical treatment of a bird

### Principal Features:

Utonai-ko is a 243ha freshwater lake situated in the floodplain of the Bibi River, in a suburb of Tomakomai City, southwestern Hokkaido. Three thousand years ago, the area was a coastal embayment that became cut off from the open sea by sand dunes and sandpits. The lake is surrounded by a swamp of reed and sedge, followed by a forest of broad-leaf deciduous trees, including the Japanese alder.

### Stopover for Waterfowl:

The area is one of the most important stopovers and wintering grounds in Japan for migratory birds; tens of thousands of birds including the White-fronted Goose, Bean Goose, Whooper Swan, and Tundra Swan visit the area every year. The marshland around the lake serves as an important breeding place for Siberian Rubythroat *Erithacus cal-*

*liope* and Yellow-breasted Bunting *Emberiza aureola*, and the forest is a winter habitat for White-tailed Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* and Steller's Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus pelagicus*. More than 260 bird species are recorded in the Utonai-ko area. The area is a part of the Waterbird Site Network based on the Partnership for the East Asian-Australasian Flyway.

### First Bird Sanctuary in Japan:

In 1981, Tomakomai City and the Wild Bird Society of Japan (WBSJ) designated the area a bird sanctuary, the first in Japan. With collaboration with a local NGO, WBSJ signed an agreement with Tomakomai City to rent the land, and designated a 510ha area including the lake and surrounding marshland and forest the Utonai-ko Sanctuary.

A lakeshore area of about 50ha is open to visitors, as well as a nature center,

seven nature observation trails and some observation huts. For reasons of protection, entry into other areas is restricted.

In 2002, the Ministry of the Environment established the Utonai-ko Wildlife Center on the site. This is the first facility in Japan built for the purposes of conducting appropriate management of National Wildlife Protection Area and as well as practicing environmental education. Operated with the cooperation of the ministry and Tomakomai City, the center organizes activities in environmental education, public awareness, as well as offering medical treatment to wildlife.

**[Sanctuary]** Created in 1981 for the purpose of conserving the habitats of wild animals, WBSJ designated Japan's first sanctuary in Utonai-ko. A nature observation center is a base for activities such as research, ecosystem management, information services, and environmental education.

### Contact Information:

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