

Kutcharo-ko

Freshwater Lake, Low Moor

Geographical Coordinates: 45°09'N, 142°20'E / Altitude: 1-2m / Area: 1,607ha / Major Type of Wetland: Freshwater lake, low moor / Designation: Special Protection Area of National Wildlife Protection Area / Municipalities Involved: Hamatonbetsu Town, Hokkaido Prefecture / Ramsar Designation: July 1989 / Ramsar Criteria: 2, 3, 6 / EAAFP Flyway Network Site



Tundra Swan gathering in the lake (Photo by K. Konishi)

General Overview:

Kutcharo-ko is one of the farthest north lakes in Japan. It is located by the coast of the Sea of Okhotsk and consists of two interconnected brackish lakes named Onuma and Konuma. The lake is surrounded by some hills with an elevation of 10 to 40m in the north and west, sand dunes to the east, and peatlands to the south. It is a shallow lake with an average depth of 1.5m and a maximum depth of 2.5m.

Six rivers flow into Konuma, and two into Onuma. The only outlet to the Sea of Okhotsk is the Kutcharo River on the east side of Onuma, where seawater flows backward at high tide.

The lake is enriched by a forest of firs and spruces as well as a clump of reeds on its shores. A variety of unique aquatic plants such as *Ruppia occidentalis* are found here. It is also a commercial fishing ground for shrimps, clams, and smelts.

The Gateway to the Japanese Archipelago:

Kutcharo-ko is an important staging ground for migratory waterfowl, where over 300 species of birds, mainly Anatidae (ducks, geese and swans), have been re-

corded. It is well-known as Japan's northernmost stopover site for Tundra Swan. Approximately 6,000 swans visit this area every spring and autumn. It is also a wintering ground for Steller's Sea-eagle (*Haliaeetus pelagicus*).

In 1995, the "Hamatombetsu Lake Kutcharo Waterfowl Observatory" was established by the Ministry of the Environment for the purpose of raising public awareness of the wise use and conservation of wetlands. The facility is managed and operated by Hama-tonbetsu Town and provides environmental education programs for visitors and local students.

Protection of Swans:

Despite its location at the northern end of Hokkaido, Kutcharo-ko enjoys a relatively mild climate due to warm ocean currents. However, about 90 % of the lake still freezes between late December and early March. In some years, the coast nearby gets covered with drift ice between mid-January and late March. To help swans feed in the frozen lake, local volunteers started feeding the swans in 1960s, which is still continuing now. The staff and vol-



Kutcharo-ko (Photo by M. Okada)



Two interconnected lakes

unteers at the Waterfowl Observation Center carry out the feeding work along with other works for conservation and education of environment.

[Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*)] The Tundra Swan breeds in the Siberian tundra during the summer, from June to September. They migrate southward around October with their young and visit Kutcharo-ko, the gateway to the Japanese Archipelago. Following a brief sojourn, the swans continue their migration to the south and winter mostly in lakes and rivers near the Sea of Japan. Some even reach the southern part of Honshu, the mainland of Japan. From April to May, they return to Kutcharo-ko before flying on to Siberia.

Contact Information:

Hamatonbetsu Town Office
<http://www.town.hamatonbetsu.hokkaido.jp/>

