

Utonai-ko

Geographical Coordinates: 42°42'N, 141°43'E / Altitude: 1-5m / Area: 510ha / Major Type of Wetland: Freshwater lake, low moor / Designation: Special Protection Area of National Wildlife Protection Area / Municipalities Involved: Tomakomai City, Hokkaido Prefecture / Ramsar Designation: December 1991 / Ramsar Criteria: 2, 5 / EAAFP Flyway Network Site

Freshwater Lake, Low Moor



Full view of Utonai-ko

Staging and wintering ground for waterbirds



General Overview:

Utonai-ko is a freshwater lake with a circumference of 9km and an area of 275ha, situated in the floodplain of the Bibi River in the eastern suburb of Tomakomai City in southwestern Hokkaido. It used to be a coastal inlet before becoming isolated from the sea by a sand bar and a sand hill about 3,000 years ago. The surrounding area was a vast wetland called Yufutsu plain, but most of which has disappeared due to land reclamation. Utonai-ko is one of the few places where the original natural environment still remains. The shoreline of the lake is a swamp of reed and sedge, surrounded by a deciduous alder forest.

Stopover Site for Waterfowl:

The area is one of the most important stopover sites and wintering grounds in Japan for migratory birds. Tens of thousands of birds including Greater White-

fronted Goose, Bean Goose, Whooper Swan, and Tundra Swan visit the area annually. The marshland around the lake serves as an important breeding ground for Siberian Rubythroat, and the forest is a winter habitat for White-tailed Sea-eagle and Steller's Sea-eagle. More than 270 bird species have been recorded in and around the lake.

The First Bird Sanctuary in Japan:

In 1981, the Wild Bird Society of Japan (WBSJ) signed an agreement with Tomakomai City to rent the land and designated the area of 510ha including marshlands and forests around the lake as the first bird sanctuary in Japan. A Nature Center was built on the northwestern shore of the lake, which became a base of observation, conservation, and study of birds.

A lakeshore area of about 50ha is open to visitors, as well as nature observation trails and hides. In order to protect the



Nature Center



Medical treatment of a bird

place, entry into other areas is restricted.

In 2002, the Ministry of the Environment established the Utonai-ko Wildlife Center. This is the first facility in Japan built for the appropriate management and operation of National Wildlife Protection Area, and for coexistence with wildlife and natural environment. The role of the facility is to offer information of the surrounding natural environment and wildlife ecology, to provide environmental education for children, and to rescue and rehabilitate wounded wildlife.

[Sanctuary] WBSJ established Japan's first sanctuary in Utonai-ko in 1981 for the purpose of conserving the habitats of wildlife. A Nature Center was built as a base for regular activities such as research, ecosystem management, information services, and environmental education supported by a stationed ranger. The Nature Center contributed significantly to raising public awareness on wetland conservation and wild bird protection.

Contact Information:

Tomakomai City Office
<http://www.city.tomakomai.hokkaido.jp/>

