

Kutcharo-ko

Freshwater Lake, Low Moor

Geographical Coordinates: 45°09'N, 142°20'E / Altitude: 1-2m / Area: 1607ha / 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 Swans gathered in the lake (Photo by K. Konishi)



Kutcharo-ko (Photo by M. Okada)



Two interconnected lakes

General Overview:

Kutcharo-ko is one of the northernmost lakes in Japan. It is located at the coast of Sea of Okhotsk and consists of two interconnected freshwater lakes called Onuma and Konuma. It faces some hills with an elevation of 10-40m in the north and west, and has a sand dune in the east and a peat land in the south. It is a shallow lake with an average depth of 1.5m and maximum depth of 2.5m.

Six rivers flow into Konuma, and two rivers into Onuma. Lake Onuma drains into the Sea of Okhotsk via the only outlet, the Kutcharo River, in the east. Onuma is subject to seawater inflow at high tide.

The lake is surrounded by a northern forest of firs and spruces, and has a reed community on the shore. A variety of unique aquatic plants such as *Ruppia occidentalis* are found here. It also is a ground for commercial fishing for shrimps, clams and smelts.

The Gateway to the Japanese Archipelago:

The area is an important staging ground for migratory waterfowl, where 290 species of birds, mainly Anatidae (ducks, geese and

swans), have been recorded. This lake is well-known as Japan's northernmost staging grounds for Tundra Swans that winter in Japan. Approximately 6000 swans visit the area every spring and autumn.

In 1995, the "Kutcharo-ko Waterfowl Observation Center" was established by the Ministry of the Environment for the purposes of raising public awareness. The center is managed and operated by Hamatonbetsu Town and provides environmental education programs for visitors and local students.

Protection of Swans:

Despite its location on the northern end of Hokkaido, Kutcharo-ko enjoys a relatively warm climate due to warm ocean currents. However, the lake still freezes over between late December and early March and in some years the coast nearby is packed with drift ice between mid-January and late March. Local volunteers started to feed the swans in 1960s and they carried on feeding for swans to help them take their food in the frozen lake. The staffs and volunteers at the Waterfowl Observation Center carry out the feeding work along with

other works for environment conservation and environment education.

[Tundra Swan *Cygnus columbianus*] Tundra Swan breeds in the Siberian tundra in summer from June to September. They migrate south around October with their young and visit Kutcharo-ko, the gateway to the Japanese Archipelago. Following a brief sojourn, they 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/>

