

Biodiversity

Many people think of national parks as tranquil places to stroll while looking at trees, flowers, rivers, and so on. In fact, Japan's national park system plays an essential role in preserving biodiversity and protecting endangered species. One local animal you might think was reasonably safe from natural threats is the Ussuri brown bear (*Ursus arctos lasiotus*). They can grow very large, some almost as big as the giant Kodiak bears of Alaska. Brown bears once roamed freely throughout Hokkaido, but their habitats have steadily shrunk in conjunction with the spread of humans. In one part of the western Ishikari region brown bears are already considered endangered, and other areas may follow. Fortunately, this park covers a large part of their habitat, and aims to preserve as much of that habitat as possible.

Another local resident, the Ezo deer, has just the opposite problem. It has proliferated to such an extent that it is damaging both agriculture and forestry, causing traffic accidents, and hurting vegetation inside the park, leading the Hokkaido government to create a strategic management plan to cope with the increasing numbers of deer.

The park is also well known for its wide variety of birds. Of course, Hokkaido winters are harsh, so the majority of the winged residents here are summer birds. The park is home to several species of woodpecker, as well as the great tit and marsh tit, the hazel grouse, Japanese thrush, brown-headed thrush, narcissus flycatcher, Japanese bush warbler, black-faced bunting, and the Oriental cuckoo. In summer you can hear them talking to each other, bringing even the densest forest alive with the sound of chirping.

The tremendous biodiversity at Shikotsu-Toya National Park is a vital element of its appeal, and protecting the wide variety of flora and fauna found within its boundaries remains an important part of the park's mission.