

Oriental White Stork (*Konotori*)

The *konotori*, or oriental white stork, was once a common sight in the wetlands and fields around Toyooka. This magnificent creature coexisted with people in their day-to-day lives and played an important role in the ecosystem.

Habitat threatened and then restored

After World War II, the natural habitat of the storks was increasingly threatened by reconstruction of rice fields, repeated and heavy use of agrochemicals, and river modification. Many of the red pine trees in which the storks had always built their nests were cut down for lumber. These changes in the ecosystem had a radical effect on the stork's population, and in 1971 the birds were declared to be extinct in the wild in Japan.

The rapid decline in the white stork's numbers prompted the city of Toyooka to start a captive breeding program in 1965 to bring the birds back into the ecosystem. Putting much effort into eco-friendly farming techniques and the establishment of a sustainable environment, the city has successfully brought the storks back to the region. Thanks to the rewilding endeavors of the local community, these birds now thrive in their natural surroundings and today there are approximately 180 oriental white storks that live out in the wild around the Toyooka area.

Symbol of happiness

To local residents, the *konotori* are considered bearers of happiness. The movement to bring these cherished birds back and the fact that they can once again exist side-by-side with the people of Toyooka has changed the outlook of the community, resulting in a healthier, more sustainable ecosystem.

The oriental white stork has an extraordinary, two-meter wingspan. It can be identified by its large body (around 1.1 meters in length), long black beak, red legs, and white wings accented with an edge of black feathers. Oriental white storks are easily identifiable when compared to heron, egrets, and other birds in the area due to their large size and striking black feathers, which stand out against their white bodies.

Visitors hoping to catch a glimpse of the storks can visit the Hyogo Park of the Oriental White Stork in Toyooka, where a resourceful museum offers additional information as well as a viewing area that looks out onto an open cage where the birds are fed daily. Keep an eye out on the rice fields and open areas around Toyooka and Kinosaki Onsen, too, where you might be lucky enough to spot a stork feeding or flying through the sky on a sunny day.