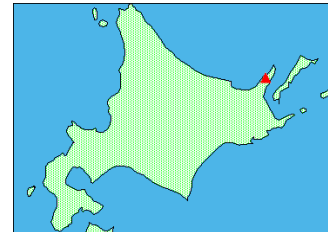


The Awe-Inspiring Shiretoko World Natural Heritage Site (Part 1)

Shiretoko Peninsula, which I visited recently, is situated on the northeastern side of Hokkaido and is Japan's most northeasterly point. The name Shiretoko originates in the expression *sir etok* in the language of the indigenous Ainu people, which is a combination of *sir* meaning "land" and *etok* meaning "edge." So *sir etok* means something like "edge of the land" or "end of the Earth." Facing the Sea of Okhotsk, Shiretoko is a long and narrow peninsula, about 70 km long and about 25 km wide. In winter the surrounding sea is covered by ice floes. Shiretoko is home to 872 types of plant, 333 types of animal, and 303 types of fish. A food chain has developed there, with the forests, sea, and rivers coming together to create an original ecosystem. In recognition of this rich biodiversity, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) listed Shiretoko as a World Natural Heritage Site in 2005. Let me introduce the attractions of Shiretoko that are so appealing to people.



The grand Shiretoko mountain range and first lake

First Stop: Shiretoko National Park Nature Center

Renting a car at Memanbetsu Airport, I enjoyed a pleasant drive of about two hours through open countryside. When I reached the peninsula, my first stop was the Shiretoko National Park Nature Center, which provides information on the attractions of Shiretoko. At the information center in the building, I was able to obtain information on the grand nature of the area. In the lecture corner, a member of staff gives a talk on how to prepare for encountering a bear and how to enjoy strolling around. In a large theater, a video titled “Four Seasons of Shiretoko” highlighting the attractions of Shiretoko is shown on a large screen measuring 12 m in height and 20 m in width. And in the rental corner, visitors can borrow items like binoculars, knee-length boots, and bear repellent spray. At the center I was told about the attractions of Shiretoko by Ms. Kaoru Shindo of the Shiretoko Foundation, who has been helping visitors here for about 11 years since moving to Shiretoko from Tokyo in awe of the region’s splendid nature.



Ms. Kaoru Shindo of the Shiretoko Foundation

She spoke to me about the food chain and biodiversity in Shiretoko. “Shiretoko Peninsula was registered as a World Natural Heritage Site in 2005,” she explained. “The registered area includes not only the land but 3 km out to sea as well. It covers 71,100 hectares, including the buffer zone. Shiretoko was the first registered site in Japan to include the ocean. Although the area is not so large, it is inhabited by several hundred animal species, including killer whales, seals, Steller’s sea lions, and sperm whales in the sea and Yezo sika deer, Ezo red foxes, and brown bears in the forests, as well as endangered species like the Blakiston’s fish owl and white-tailed eagle. Salmon and trout eat the highly nutritious plankton brought by the ice floes in the sea and then in the autumn make their way back up the rivers, where they are caught and eaten by the brown bears. The food and excrement left by the brown bears then becomes

nutriment for vegetation, such as broadleaf and coniferous trees. Even internationally, it is very rare for so many large creatures to be inhabiting such a small area.”



The information counter



Knee-length boots at the rental counter

As I was planning to take part in the Shiretoko Five Lakes Tour, I asked Ms. Shindo about how to enjoy the walk and what precautions to take. “At this time of year [late May],” she replied, “the Asian skunk-cabbage is in blossom. There are a lot of wild birds around as well, so I recommend birdwatching as well. The other day an elderly couple from the United Kingdom visited. When I asked them their reason for coming, they said that they wanted to enjoy birdwatching. Many people come in the fall as well to see the autumn colors.”

May is the mating season for brown bears, so I asked whether a brown bear might be encountered during the tour. “There are said to be about 300 brown bears inhabiting this narrow Shiretoko Peninsula,” Ms. Shindo replied, “so there is always a chance.” And if you do encounter one? “Don’t run away. Brown bears have a habit of chasing after creatures that turn their backs and run away. Brown bears can run at a speed of 50 or 60 kilometers per hour, so if one comes after you, don’t think you can get away. The best thing to do is to look the bear in the eyes, gradually move backward, and then get away.”



A brown bear at Shiretoko Goko (Photo courtesy of Mr. Arata Matsumoto)

“The important thing,” Ms. Shindo went on, “is to try not to encounter a bear in the first place. Clap your hands or speak in a loud voice to let the bears know that humans are near. On the tour you will be accompanied by a professional guide with a good knowledge of the forests of Shiretoko. In an emergency, follow the instructions of the guide and act calmly.” As a countermeasure against brown bears, she added, “There is an elevated boardwalk, so if you are worried, you can just walk along that. Anyway, you will also be able to encounter many small animals and hear the chirping of birds in the fresh air of the verdant forest, so please enjoy the attractions of Shiretoko tomorrow with all five senses.”

It was when I saw the Shiretoko Goko (Five Lakes) area the next day that I understood why Ms. Shindo, who has visited many World Natural Heritage Sites both in Japan and overseas, was so attracted by Shiretoko that she settled here.

The Grand Nature of Shiretoko Goko Stimulates the Five Senses

The next morning, after checking the weather, I phoned the Shiretoko Goko Lakes Field House, which is operated by the Shiretoko Foundation, in order to take part in a guided walking tour of the lakes. In May, the mating season for brown bears, there are two tours available: the Large Loop Tour, which takes in all five lakes in about three hours, and the Short Loop Tour, which goes around two lakes in about 90 minutes. Both tours are accompanied by a guide who knows how to respond if the group encounters a brown bear and who explains the attractions of the area. I

booked to take part in the Short Loop Tour starting at 11:00. It costs ¥2,500 for adults. After completing the procedures at the guided tour reception, you are issued with a certificate giving special permission to enter the Shiretoko National Park Land Use Adjustment Zone.



Shiretoko Goko Lakes Field House (left)



The guided tour reception counter in the general information center (right)

Our guide on the tour was Mr. Haruma Shibata of Shiretoko Nature Office, a nature guide with seven years of experience. As well as me, the participants include three hearty elderly couples who were all very eager to go.



Our guide, Mr. Haruma Shibata



Sprightly senior participants

In the lecture room inside the Field House, we received some brief instructions, including how to respond if we encountered a brown bear and the ban on taking any drinks or food other than water or tea on the course. When we went outside, we immediately saw a sign indicating the entrance to the Shiretoko Goko Lakes Ground Pathway nature trail. “You are now entering the pathway,” warned Mr. Shibata. “From this moment, if it is decided to cancel the tour because of the frequent appearance of brown bears or because another group has encountered one, the tour will end on the spot, and you will not be able to proceed any further. Bad luck may strike at any time.” Hearing the guide’s words, I set off on the tour thinking that we could indeed encounter a bear.



Entrance to the Shiretoko Goko Lakes Ground Pathway nature trail (left)



The ground pathway heading toward the five lakes (right)

“Brown bears do not have very good vision,” explained Mr. Shibata, “but they have excellent hearing and very keen noses. Their sense of smell is said to be eight times stronger than that of a dog. They love sweet things, so it’s very dangerous to take items like sweets or juice on the course. The smell would attract them toward us, and they would eat any sweets that were dropped. To prevent that, therefore, it is prohibited to bring any sweet food or drinks on the tour.”

I had imagined brown bears to be carnivorous, eating things like salmon and deer, but I realized from Mr. Shibata’s explanation that this image was mistaken. “Shiretoko’s brown bears eat Asian skunk-cabbage and Yezo sika deer in spring, cicada larvae, crayfish, and ants and other insects in summer, and mountain grapes, acorns, salmon, trout, and so on in autumn,” he said. “About 80% of their food is vegetation. In winter they hibernate, so basically they do not eat then. They are omnivorous, consuming more vegetable than animal food.”

There are many insects inhabiting the dense woodland of Shiretoko. Cicadas that had avoided being eaten by brown bears as larvae and grown into adults flew around as if greeting us. Amusingly, one of them even landed on Mr. Shibata’s chest. When we proceeded deeper into the forest, we came upon the fantastic sight of the second lake against the background of the Shiretoko mountain range. If it were permitted, I thought, it would be great to sit down in a rocking chair here and spend hours just gazing at the scene.



Asian skunk-cabbage, a favorite of brown bears (Photo courtesy of Mr. Arata Matsumoto) (left)



The cicada that landed on Mr. Shibata’s chest (right)



The fantastic second lake

Superb View Beyond the Forest

Beyond the forest, we were greeted by a superb view of the Shiretoko mountain range and the beautiful first lake with its reflection of the mountains. “The first lake has a circumference of 600 meters and a maximum depth of about 3 meters,” explained Mr. Shibata as he took photos of the participating couples. “Until around 1965 the vicinity of the first lake was used as pasture land. You’re very lucky indeed. Today there is almost no wind blowing, so the Shiretoko mountain range is reflected very clearly on the surface of the water. This is the best viewing spot.”



View of the Shiretoko mountain range from the first lake

“To the right you can see the Sea of Okhotsk,” he went on. “If you want to view Shiretoko Peninsula from the sea, there are sightseeing boats going from Utoro Port to Shiretoko Cape, Japan’s most northeasterly point. I recommend you to try it. You will be able to see brown bears in the special reserve area, which is inhabited by many bears. Depending on the day, mainly on the Rausu side you will also be able to see killer whales. And from about late January until early March the water near the mouth of the Amur River in Russia freezes and becomes ice floes, which drift to the Sea of Okhotsk coast. There are ice floe experience tours, in which you wear a special drysuit and, following the instructions of the guide, walk on the ice. Recently these tours have become very popular among foreigners, especially Taiwanese.”



View of the Sea of Okhotsk from the elevated boardwalk (left)



Shiretoko sightseeing boat (right)

“You can see different scenery and have different experiences in each of the four seasons in Shiretoko,” Mr. Shibata added. “Please come again to the Shiretoko Peninsula World Natural Heritage Site, which can be enjoyed throughout the year. Thank you for participating in today’s guided tour of the Shiretoko Goko forest.” With these parting words, Mr. Shibata brought the tour of about 90 minutes to an end. The time had really flown by.



Visitors can stroll as they like and for free along the elevated boardwalk.

I didn’t expect that the tour would be as wonderful as it was. Next time, I’ll definitely participate in the Long Loop Tour of about three hours taking in all five lakes!

Cooperation:

Shiretoko National Park Nature Center

<http://center.shiretoko.or.jp/en/>

Shiretoko Nature Office

<http://www.sno.co.jp/> (Japanese)