The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus
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Wild Watch: Blood in the Water in Hokkaido's Sea of Okhotsk

Nature tour turns sour as we see 'endangered' prey killed

Mark Brazil

A great white mass, a broken blanket of sea ice, was moving south down the Sea of Okhotsk carried on currents and blown by winds from the north. From the flank of Mount Mokoto it appeared like a mirage, a whitened margin to the sea's northern horizon, but from the much closer range of the cliff tops at Cape Notoro, the jagged nature of the floes were discernible through my telescope.

A Steller's sea lion bull with cows on remote Lony Island in the northern sea of Okhotsk, Russia

The sea ice on the Sea of Okhotsk north of Hokkaido is the southernmost in the northern hemisphere, and at its greatest extent it reaches the Shiretoko Peninsula and flows erratically down into the Nemuro Channel between eastern Hokkaido and Kunashiri Island 20 km offshore.

Sea ice is a harbinger of deep winter; it contributes to the further chilling of Hokkaido, and brings with it a web of life ranging from macro-planktonic clione (sea angels) to marine mammals including seals and sea lions.

Each winter I await the arrival of these creatures. Some are familiar to me from their breeding grounds in Russia, others I have only ever witnessed here in winter. As the ice approaches day by day, birds appear to move ahead of it. There seem to be ever more harlequin and black scoter ducks bobbing on the inshore waves, and more guillemots diving where the incoming waves break languidly toward the shore.

A boat with rifleman in the bow hunts Steller's sea lions off the Shiretoko Peninsula south of Hokkaido on Jan. 21, 2008 then takes its prey back to port lashed to the side.

This year, a prolonged cold spell during January seems to have broken December's pattern of thaw and freeze, driving birds such as pine grosbeaks down from the mountains and others such as common redpolls south from more northerly regions in unusual numbers.

Each January and February I visit capes and harbors along the Sea of Okhotsk coast and the Shiretoko Peninsula, seeking out winter visiting seabirds. Such places are often bleak and windswept, even bitterly cold, but then a madly dashing steely-gray peregrine falcon may flash past, a dramatic Steller's sea eagle may glide overhead, or a flock of snow buntings may flutter past in monochrome confusion.

Other bobbing heads

Among the erratically wobbling sea ducks, the harlequins and scoters, which dive periodically from view, I look for other bobbing heads, particularly those of the Largha seals (aka spotted seals) that frequent these shores. These blunt-nosed creatures float upright in the water, their heads pointing upward, or they haul out at low tide on exposed rocks and lie there like lethargic campers enveloped in thick sleeping bags. A friend in Alaska refers to them rather indelicately as "blubber slugs."

Some days ago I was making my way southward down the Shiretoko Peninsula from Rausu, spotting eagles and Sika deer on the coastal slope and keeping an eye open for foxes and flitting flocks of Asian rosyfinches — always hoping for more unusual wildlife.

Then, I realized, a loud, sharp crack reverberating across the waves was not that of brittle sea ice breaking; no, it was rifle fire. That unmistakable cracking sound is one not often encountered in justifiably gun-cautious Japan. Rarely have I even heard the sound of deer hunters at work, though I have often enough encountered them, and seen the gatherings of crows, ravens, eagles and foxes that the carcasses they leave attract.

Rifle fire at sea is far more unusual. On this occasion the hunter was in a harness, standing in the bow of a small boat. He was braced

against the kick of the waves and bundled against the chill of the biting wind as the boat sped back and forth offshore.

Only minutes before, my companions (members of a nature tour I was leading) and I had spotted lunging heads in the water and had been thrilled to find a group of Steller's sea lions (Eumetopias jubatus) just offshore from the Shiretoko Peninsula World Heritage Site.

These sea lions remind me of an eager pack of dogs, rushing pell-mell in one direction before charging off excitedly in another. They can turn in an instant and dash and splash back again in a moment; they are adept at diving, swift and lithe in their movements and frequently lunge forward and up, craning their heads and necks out of the water to peer about — when they resemble enormous inquisitive otters.

I have been close to their breeding grounds in Russia, and large males in the water are fearless, approaching intruders to find out what they are and what they are up to. This curiosity is their undoing when there is a hunter about.

In just a few moments from our first sighting of them, our thrill had turned to dismay as we realized that the dense pack of about a dozen females and perhaps two or three larger males was being pursued. They were swift enough in their turns, and clever enough in their tactics to elude the hunters repeatedly, but like all marine mammals, their weakness was in their need for air.

Each time they broke the surface to breathe they gave away their new position, and before long one individual was either too tired or too curious for its own good. It broke away from the group and lingered on the surface a little too long, watching its angel of death approaching.

It was the rifle crack we heard that had mortally injured it; deep-red blood burst into the water from its wound and we knew that its moments were now numbered. The boat rounded on it; the sea lion dived in a process that was repeated several times, but the hunter followed its bloody trail in the leaden sea and eventually, several minutes later, when it resurfaced closer to the boat, a second shot ended its life.

White splashes and red foam

The last we saw of the animal was its carcass lashed to the side of the boat as it zoomed back to the harbor creating white splashes and red foam.

Probably within hours the mammal would have been butchered and its meat made available to local restaurants and canneries — yes, I have seen canned sea-lion meat for sale in souvenir shops for tourists!

It's an extraordinary irony that the very purpose of listing the Shiretoko Peninsula as a World Heritage Site can only have been to promote it for further nature tourism — after all, it was already afforded Japan's highest protected status as a national park. Yet how many tourists attracted by Shiretoko's natural environment and wildlife would wish to witness such a shocking event?

It's a further irony that the Steller's sea lion , the largest of the eared seals (Otariidae), is listed internationally as an endangered species because of its precipitous decline in the Bering Sea and along the Aleutian Islands. It is also listed as a threatened or endangered species under the United States' Endangered Species Act; and is either already on, or is soon to be on, Russia's Red Data List. As a result, killing them is strictly prohibited in the United States, Canada and Russia — yet in Japan some are still shot each year, ostensibly to protect local fisheries.

Another bitter pill is that in Japan an endangered marine mammal such as the Steller's sea lion comes under the jurisdiction of the Fisheries Agency — not the Ministry of the Environment as one might expect. It's particularly disappointing that, despite the hard work that's gone into protecting it, a revision of The Wildlife Protection and Hunting Law in 2002 failed to list this species as requiring protection.

After decades of steadily promoting Japan as a destination for nature tourism, in recent years I have seen a considerable upsurge in visitor numbers. Japan has a golden opportunity to project itself as a fine destination for special-interest tourism in whale-, dolphin- and seal-watching, not to mention the attractions of all its other fascinating wildlife.

Yet it seems that where marine mammals are concerned, Japan is hellbent on persecution and consumption.

If this issue and related conservation matters interest you, try this link.

Article and photographs by Mark Brazil, a naturalist and author with a fascination for life in all its forms and the questions that it raises. During 2008, Mark will be running two workshops in eastern Hokkaido, one in spring (late May), and one in autumn (mid-September) during the bird- migration seasons. Contact him for further information at markbrazil@world.email.ne.jp

This article appeared in The Japan Times on Feb. 20, 2008. Reprinted at Japan Focus on March 30, 2008.

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