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As the Japanese Crested Ibis (Toki) Goes, So Goes . . .

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* Japanese name: Toki

* Scientific name: *Rhacophorus schlegelii*

* Description: It doesn't get much more Japanese than this. The large, white-feathered crested ibis — a wader with a downward-curving bill, a face bare of feathers and bright-red skin and legs — is a worldwide symbol of Japan (though the national bird is the pheasant). The birds grow up to 78 cm long, have a plume of feathers on the back of the head, and the flight feathers are tinged with red, a celebrated feature that was also the cause of their downfall.

* Where to find them: At the moment, Sado Island in Niigata Prefecture. The crested ibis used to be widespread in Japan, but the species was hunted to the brink of extinction; environmental damage finished them off. They used to be found in pine forests and wetlands all over Japan, and also in South Korea and China. A population does remain in Shaanxi Province in China, and it is from there that birds were brought back to Japan to enter a captive-breeding program to reintroduce the species to the wild. The program aims to reintroduce 60 ibises to Japan by 2015. There are currently 10 free-flying on Sado Island, five males and five females, all fitted with GPS tracking devices.

* Food: Frogs, newts, small fish, aquatic insects and sometimes mice are all taken.

* Special features: Now officially designated as National Natural Treasures, these birds were revered by the shoguns of feudal Japan, who forbade their capture or death by hunting. But when Japan modernized following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, reverence for the birds was forgotten and they were hunted up and down the land, both for their feathers and for food. Then, after World War II, Japan's massive program of self-sustaining agriculture led to the use of vast amounts of fertilizers and pesticides, and the pollutants took their toll on the weakened ibis population. The crested ibis is a symbol of Japan for its strange beauty, but to me it is also symbolic of the country's unfathomable relationship with nature. How can an animal that is widely loved be allowed to be driven to extinction? Yet it is now also a symbol of hope, as the birds have been returned to the country — and this time are being treated as if they are members of the Imperial Family.

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