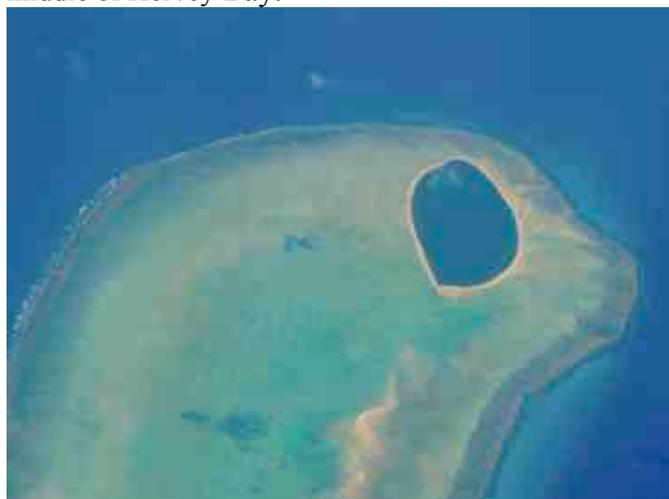


Tokiko Dawson's and John Sinclair's

Diary for Japan 2012**Part 1 — Hokkaido****Monday, 21st May
Brisbane to Tokyo**

It is strange to start a trip feeling a bit “jet-lagged” but after a week of heavy weeding work on Fraser Island that is how we were feeling when we woke at 5.30 on a crisp and incredibly clear Brisbane May day. We caught a cab to South Bank station and there farewelled our house guest Robin and as she went to Brisbane airport to catch her flight back to the Australian snowfields, we caught a train in the opposite direction heading to the Coolangatta Airport on our way to Hokkaido, the home of most of the Japanese snowfields. It was train and then bus to the airport and the usual chaos at the airport where we discovered that we had left Su's precious iPad behind. Still we can manage without it.

The flight north took us over Stradbroke, Moreton and Bribie Islands and Noosa although there were only glimpses between the many small clouds. Rushing to the Starboard side as we approached Fraser Island it was amazing to note that we passed over Eurong where we had just been weeding the previous week. The clotted clouds started to break open towards the western side of the island providing great views of Moon Point and Rooney's Point as we made our way north up the middle of Hervey Bay.



**Lady Musgrave Island last visited in December 2011
as seen from above 21 May 2012**

Su got a great photo of Lady Musgrave Island as we passed it and some coral reefs north of that. We were looking forward to Papua New Guinea when the aircraft did a U-turn somewhere north of Cooktown and returned to Cairns to unload a sick passenger. We were over an hour on the ground in a rainy Cairns that meant a late arrival in Tokyo.

The flight over Papua New Guinea was interesting although it took some time to identify any landmarks. There were some wonderful meandering rivers on the port side flowing into the Gulf of Papua and the spectacular dissected mountains. As the northern coast came into view one landmark was identified—Salamaua peninsula but as usual Lae, the wettest city in the world was shrouded in cloud.

From there it was an uneventful flight arriving in Tokyo at 10.30 — two hours behind our schedule.

Our late arrival in Narita complicated our plans and many businesses were shut and we just managed to catch the last Skyliner train into Tokyo. We changed to another train to take us to Hamastucho and the familiar Chisun Hotel. After checking in excess luggage destined only for Ungandji we arrived at our room showered and crashed into bed at 1.00 a.m.. (2.00 a.m. Brisbane time).

Monday, 22nd May**Hokkaido****Kushiro and Lake Akan**

We rose at 5.00 am and made our way back to the railway station to catch the monorail express to Hameda Airport. We arrived there and checked in at 5.55 am exactly two hours before our scheduled departure to Kushiro.

After a leisurely breakfast and strolling around this monstrously huge terminal (only one of three of similar or larger size). A bus took us out to our 737 that had barely a spare seat.

On our flight north to Kushiro, the landscape below at least as far as Ungandji was obscured by cloud. Then for a while until well north of Sendai it opened up and we could see the snow clad mountains of Shirakami World Heritage area and one spectacular volcano before the cloud closed in again. We were impressed by the recent fresh snow that lay in snowdrifts in many places below indicating a recent Spring snowfall.

Little time was wasted after collecting our small car at the airport before heading off to the Kurishiro Ramsar Wetlands. Kushiro hosted the 2009 World Heritage General Assembly when this wetland was declared. However despite a very interesting architecture of the Wetlands Centre, little seems to have changed since then. It has an eagles rehabilitation centre there but few other birds. There were two grebes on the lake, very few crows and one wagtail seen during our visit there.

As we made our way towards Akan Lake though there was a reward. We spied a Red Crowned Crane from

the car and making our way across a farm's manure dump found the crane sitting on a nest in a pond and a few other ducks in the distance. It is rare and endangered species and according to the Kushiro Wetlands brochure: —

Red Crowned Crane (Grus Japonensis) with a wingspan of 2.4 m. Although they were nearly extinct in the 1920s the population has increased owing to the local people's conservation effort. The population is about 1,000 now and most of them live in the Kuchiro and Nemuro region.



Red Crowned Crane on her nest near Kuchiro

The main industry we could see was quarrying the abundant sand from volcanic ash, mountains of it and dairy-factory farming. Hokkaido produces most of the dairy produce for the rest of Japan and the cows survive the long winters in sheds. Every farm had a name.

The 50 kilometre drive to Akan Lake was most interesting. The speed limit of 50 kph was generally honoured by most drivers. In urban areas the speed limit dropped to 30 kph. It is the same speed limit throughout Japan and took some time for we Aussies used to exceeding twice that speed on roads like that if they were in Australia to adjust. Su struggled to keep the speed down in our car that seemed little more than a ride in mower in many respects. We nick-named it RIMMY (Ride IN Motor Mower). Slower speeds enabled us to observe more in the countryside.

Cherry trees were blossoming on some hillsides, Tulips and daffodils and other colourful spring flowers were growing in the farm gardens.

We were not impressed by the presentation of the village we were staying in, Akan Onsen (*onsen* = spa and there are plenty of them here). The high rise hotels crowding around the shores of the Lake seemed so out of character with the peaceful rural and mountain scenery we had just passed through. It looked like Yucksville, the equivalent of Dollywood or Gatlingburg capitalizing on a great natural asset but in the process destroying it. Already the lake has lost a lot of its once famed clarity as a result of pollution emanating from this settlement. The countless souvenir shops are

hoping that the bid to make this oldest National Park in Japan a World Heritage site may have a job in front of them if they can't control the water quality of the lake. The brochure we had attributed the dropping of clarity in the clarity of the lake water has halved in the last half century to the resort developments in this ugly town that serves the tourist industry and sells only souvenirs, as we discovered when we wanted to shop for some more basic personal items.

After a curry buffet we boarded *Marimo Maru*, one of the huge ferries to take a tour of the lake. The tour takes about an hour and a half but it was great value. We landed Churui Island, the smallest of the lakes' four islands to visit the Marimo Display Centre. Here we could see first hand these amazing emerald green balls of algae in various sizes in aquariums. They are the main tourist attraction of Akan and the basis for most of the millions of souvenirs being sold in the village.



Marimo in Lake Akan's Churui Island Display Centre

The lake cruise continued on and apart from being impressed by the pink azaleas in bloom lining the lake shore and the volcanic cones towering around us we saw the lake gates that regulate the water releases for the Hydro electricity that may also impede World Heritage listing. It was a lovely boat ride.

Back on shore we walked along the lake edge and photographed some of the mainly white spring flowers and almost failed to note the snowdrift along the lakeshore because it was more grey than white due to the concentration of fallout covering it.

We made our way to our very comfortable *Minshuku* where we felt at home sleeping on a futon on the tatami matting floor. This was because we camped on Fraser Island only last week on air mattresses on the ground. (Minshukus are the equivalent of our B&Bs.)

We then made our way to the nearby Ainu Kotan Village where we enjoyed a traditional Ainu dinner of a spicy venison stew before going off to the theatre to see the Ainu performances that included playing on the mouth harp similar to the Celtic mouth harp. It is a sad reflection that the handout material noted that there were just 130 Ainu in this village, the largest Ainu settlement in Hokkaido.

Our first day in Hokkaido was a very full and must enjoyable day but it was exhausting and I slept like a log for six unbroken hours.

Wednesday, 23rd May

Hokkaido

Akan National Park and to Shiretoko

It was a bit brisker and fine when we woke and after catching up with this diary we enjoyed a typical minshuku breakfast before walking over to the Ainu Kotan to capture some images we hadn't seen last night and to succumb to acquiring a few more small souvenirs. We also acquired some good local knowledge from an Ainu shop-keeper and headed out of tow without much delay to enjoy the beautiful weather of the day to see Mashu Ko. (Ko = Lake). It was a longish drive up a couple of mountain sections that had our motor mower sized engine working hard. There were a couple of stops but at one lookout over some small lakes where many birds were singing loudly we resolved a riddle we had posed as to the high and elaborate fencing lining some odd sections of road. They apparently stop the snow sweeping across and piling up on these vulnerable sections of road.



The small Ainu population in Hokkaido exerts a powerful cultural influence as epitomised in this Akan Ainu Kotan where the all seeing owl has all visitors in its sights at all times. It is a powerful symbol for tourist souvenirs

We also stopped at the Takimi Bridge to see the waterfall on the Tachaguchi River that flows out of Lake Akan. It has already turned a number of hydro turbines and is destined to do so in a few more places yet on its way to the sea. However it was nice to see the water flowing freely and not being pushed through pips to generate power (although with the Japan's closure of all of its nuclear power plants hydro power is a very vital part of Japan's energy supply.

Mashu Ko was a much more profound lake than I had anticipated. It was 20 square kilometres in area, only a third of the size of its nearby sister lake Kushanaruko but it was more virginal and profound. Descent down to the surface of this 212 metre deep lake was nigh impossible for most mortals as the cliffs surrounding it

raged from 150 to 4500 metres in height. The water level was 351 metres above sea level. It epitomized to awesome creative (and destructive) powers of volcanoes.

After a close encounter with a fox on the way we descended to confront another not yet quite extinct volcano, Mt Iwo.



A red fox crossed our path as we drove by

Here sulphurous steam was gushing out from many vents around the mountain that was mostly bereft of vegetation as a result. Mt Iwo, we discovered was linked though to a nearby township of Kawayu Onsen on the edge of Kussharoko by a walking track we could see from the road with a number of interpretive signs along the way. We were curious to get out to walk it but there was no access from the road.

We stopped for lunch in Kawayu Onsen close to the Kawayu Eco Centre. Here we made our inquiries from a young interpretive officer who we discovered had spent five years in Australia studying ecotourism at Flinders University in Adelaide. The Centre is run by the Ministry of Environment and focussed on providing interpretation of the track from the Centre to Mt Iwo.



Mt Iwo vents its sulphurous steam as a symbol of the powerful volcanic influences in the region

Having obtained a brochure on the Centre itself we then headed to Abashiri stopping only briefly to view the enormous 60 square kilometre Lake Kussharo which

rested in a large caldera, the remnant of 300,000 years of volcanic activity. It might have been larger except for the younger volcanic activity that created Mt Iwo and Lake Masho on one side. The very large island in the lake also took up some area.

Abashiri is the infamous prison that contains the whole of Japan's prison population on Death Row. There is still capital punishment in Japan although the Japanese Government is most reluctant to enforce it. We were there not to see the prison though but to organize our JR rail passes. Because of our late arrival we hadn't been able to do this earlier in our trip.

Having settled our tickets we then drove on to Utoro the village surrounded by the Shiretoko World Heritage area. It was a race to make sure we reached there by 6.00 p.m. but we succeeded passing through rich farmlands that seemed to be devoted to small crops and a Ramsar wetland we are scheduled to return to. The last leg of the journey hugged the coast and gave us glimpses of the prodigious bird life here.

Our minshuku in Utoro was Siretokuo-tsukudaso. Su had booked it because she thought it wasn't a huge place and because it had private facilities. It was just over a mile from the town centre but it was much more than we had anticipated with the best and largest minshuku room I have yet experienced and an open atmosphere. The whole minshuku was larger than anticipated.

Su had been advised to take full advantage of our Shiretoko stay to taste its great seafood delights so she ordered a Japanese seafood banquet that was quite a meal taking almost an hour and a half to work our way through almost samples of most of seafoods harvested around here from crabs, prawns scallops to fish and roe and much more with a little venison and some vegetables added for good measure. It was one of the most delightful meals I can remember

Thursday, 24th May

Hokkaido

Shiretoko World Heritage Area

It was an inauspicious start to the day. The light sprinkle that has commenced just as we arrived in Utoro had turned into a constant drizzle that had continued throughout the night. This was to be our only full day in the Shiretoko World Heritage area and it was disappointing that the weather looked so grey. Still it was without any wind and that augured well for our first proposed activity a boat trip to appreciate the combination of marine and terrestrial values of the Shiretoko Peninsula.

After a splendid breakfast at our comfortable minshuku we made our way down to the port area that accommodated a large fishing fleet and a small fast boat, "*Brown Bear*", operated by Shiretoko Cruiser tours. It took a maximum of 10 passengers, although

with a load limit of 1140 kg there wouldn't want to be too many as heavy as me or we would be jettisoning some baggage and clothing. Clothing though was most essential as the 8 passengers aboard sat outside in the 10C temperature as the boat zoomed along at 40-50 kph. Still equipped with additional layers of ponchos and life vests it was tolerable.

Although the tour had trivialized some of the coastal features by focussing on the oddities in an anthropocentric way, as the tour progressed it provided more focus on the environment. There were vast populations of Slaty Grey Gulls (that seemed almost identical to the Pacific Gull of southern Australia except for a colour shade. Cormorants, kittywakes and lots more sea birds and a few raptors with one sighting of a rare white tailed eagle. The highlight though was to see so many Hokkaido bears in the wild. There were at least nine going about their business along the shore, fishing and gathering fruit. Fortunately it wasn't raining for our al fresco tour but unfortunately the low cloud fogged out a view of the magnificent mountains towering above. The boat trip was reminiscent of the Lord Howe Island round island trip.



This is the story of the three bears prowling along the shores of Shiretoko World Heritage area as seen from the "Brown Bear". They were among many we saw that day.

After an 11.00am snack on fish and chips (that turned out to be the last meal of the day), we headed for the Utoro World Heritage Visitor Centre. I was anxious to get ideas on presentation of World Heritage sites. It turned to be a most informative visit in gaining an understanding of the complicated management arrangements for Shiretoko. I was keen to learn how they implemented a Management Plan and it seems that there is no clear plan of management. That is because of the complexities of land tenure and usage. Although most of the land is now in public hands there are residual inholdings and Japanese rules for the creation of National Parks is to identify suitable areas irrespective of land tenure and then manage all of the land with a nature conservation objective.

In Shiretoko the process was assisted because many areas that had been taken up for farming had been

abandoned and locals in the 1960s had formed a voluntary organization to rehabilitate the cleared areas and acquire the title and incorporate this in the park. Unfortunately their initial efforts resulted in straight row plantations and now there is an ongoing effort to undertake mixed plantings in a more natural way. Out of this movement has emerged a very significant non-government group, Shiretoko Nature Foundation that plays a very significant role in management, as we were later to discover.

lifestyle and because it provided insights into measures being taken to manage visitor numbers and impacts. Due to the potential threats from bears, it is obligatory from May to August for all walkers to be accompanied by a trained guide who carries bear deterrents and a radio as well as being very alert to the signs of bears nearby. By random chance we were lucky enough to have the only accredited Ainu guide appointed to lead us. Masaka Malauka was about 45 y.o. and his mother was Ainu and his father ethnic Japanese. He increased our appreciation and understanding of Ainu culture. He proudly wore his Ainu headscarf like a badge of honour and plans that when his brother qualifies as a guide they will form the first Ainu ecotour guiding business in Hokkaido.



Having just issued a media release about the need to wash down vehicles before going on to Fraser Island, I was most impressed at the rigour with quarantine measures in Shiretoko are being pursued. There were disinfectant mats outside most National Park buildings before on entered and before we could start a walk to the Goko Lakes we also had to hand scrub the soles of our boots with the equipment left out for that purpose.

As we headed for the Shiretoko Goko (the Five Lakes) we stopped briefly at the Nature Centre on the Main road located just near the turn off to the lakes. It was bustling with tourists and we were later to discover it is bustling most of the time and that as well as catering for all needs of tourists, it is also one of the two HQ's of the Shiretoko Nature Foundation.

Heading into the lakes we noted that both sides of the road were lined with many small monoculture plantations of various tree species. We were later to learn that these were the early efforts by locals and volunteers to rehabilitate the landscape after the short-lived farms that had cleared the original forests had failed.

We had planned on taking the long (3 kilometre) walk that was curiously scheduled to take five hours to walk to all five lakes and it was 2.00 pm and no groups were allowed to leave after 2.30. The walk was extremely interesting because apart from its intrinsic interest it gave us an unexpected insight into the Ainu culture and



Ainu guide Masaka views part of his domain, one of the Shiretoko Goko (Five Lakes). Normally these lakes reflect the towering mountains above but today the area was shrouded in fog and visibility was very limited.

The lakes walk also revealed much of the inside thinking on park management. The walk we were taking was until recently undertaken by 500,000 visitors annually. The number has grown exponentially since World Heritage listing. The trampling impact was terrible. Measures to correct this are (1) walking with a guide that limits the number of walkers to 300 per day; (2) changing the direction of the one way walk to better manage the entry; (3) adding a requirement that every walker had to undergo a 10 minute briefing prior to departure; and (4) the requirement to be accompanied by a guide.

Although we could not see much of the larger grander landscape due to the fog, we did get a lot of interpretation. Because there are many commonalities between the problems Shiretoko has with bears and Fraser Island has with dingoes, I am preparing a separate essay on this topic for MOONBI.

The interesting walk did take the scheduled three hours and we arrived back at the entry station just prior to closure. We said farewell to Masaka and then pumped Akiba Keita for information about the park management and the role of volunteers. He was able to

provide more background into the management of the World Heritage area with which he seems so involved. We presented us with a copy of *'Wildlife in Shiretoko and Yellowstone National Park'* that discussed research outcomes and analysis on wildlife and park management from both World Natural Heritage Sites with a full English translation.

He also provided some valuable assistance when our little ride-in motor mower collapsed with a flat battery causing all of the staff to be delayed because they couldn't leave without locking the gates behind them. However a quick jumper lead start finally relieved us of our embarrassment and we went back in time for another amazing banquet.

It was a very full and exhausting day and we fitted so much into it we felt as if we had some real understanding of this great World Heritage site which has many problems in common with Fraser Island as well as many similarities despite some most obvious contrasts between the two, especially in geography, geology, and cultural settings.



One of the too many deer in Shiretoko have created and environmental dilemma. With the absence of traditional Ainu culling the area is so over-populated that they are damaging the forest by stripping the trees of bark during winter. The Shiretoko Nature Foundation has now implemented a culling program to reduce deer population to a sustainable number. Much of the area near the Shiretoko Goko lakes had been cleared for farming but is being progressively reforested.

Friday, 25th May Hokkaido Shiretoko to Abashiri

It was a pleasant surprise to wake to a fine sunny morning after the grey day of yesterday. The sun was out and we felt great as we made an early start from our minshuku because we had a long way to go and a deadline to turn "Rimmy" in to the car rental office in Abashiri before 6.00 pm.

After another spending breakfast with dishes we hadn't sampled before we headed for the Nature Centre just out of town. However here we had our first shock. As we drove down into the town we drove into a low mist.

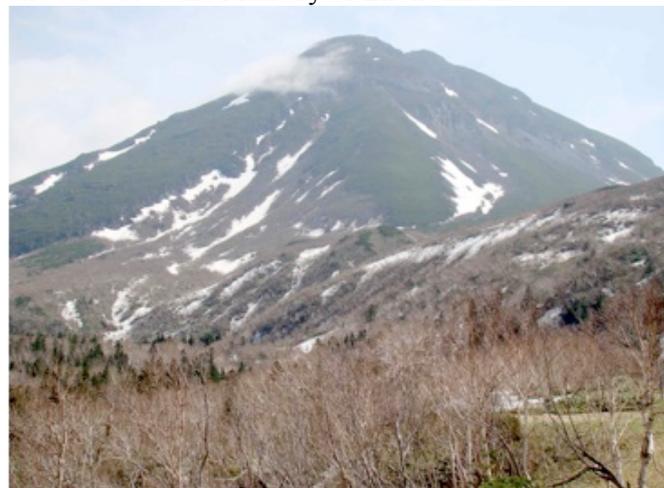
As we ascended the mountains to the Nature Centre the air cleared once more into a wonderful day. Had we taken the boat trip this morning we wouldn't have seen the wildlife because of this thick mist that only went as high as the inversion layer.

At the Nature Centre that we had stopped in only briefly yesterday we finally grasped a better understanding of the role of the **Shiretoko Nature Foundation**. It appears that this non-government community group runs the park with funds it raises itself. However its work must meet the approval of the Ministry of Environment. The very elaborate Nature Centre which houses a restaurant and retail outlets as well as Foundation office accommodation and an interpretive centre was built and supplied by the Ministry of Environment. It also seems to be a contractor to the Ministry through grants or by tendering to manage the park. Its stated mission is:

- *To protect natural resources and ecosystems.*
- *To develop and improve management systems for sustainable use of the area.*
- *To offer outreaching programs to enhance visitor's experience and increase public awareness.*
- *To provide scientific knowledge for general public to enhance nature conservation in other area.*

It does this by (1) Research and Conservation; (2) Wildlife Management; (3) Ecosystem Restoration; (4) Education and Park Use Program; (5) Facility Maintenance

The Foundation is a locally based non-profit organization and has been dedicated to conserve wild flora and fauna and to promote adequate utilization of the Shiretoko National Park since 1988. It organizes volunteer programs, community engagement and enforcement. It is like an overgrown FIDO. The Foundation is both an advocate and the practitioner but answerable to the Ministry of Environment.



Mt Rausu, the highest Mountain in a chain all above 1500 metres within the National Park sits beside the Shiretoko Pass. While it was bathed in sunshine the low, thick fog obscured all views along the coast as we drove on to the Notsuke Ramsar site.

The road Route 344 through the Shiretoko Pass was really quite stunning as it ascended towards the side of Mt Rausu. The air was crisp, sky was clear and sunny and we felt quite exhilarated by our surrounds on this very scenic drive. We stopped in the Rausu Visitor Centre, the third visitor Centre for this World Heritage site. It manages and serves the other side of the peninsula that has a larger local population, most of whom are focussed on harvesting the very productive sea.



Fishing in Rausu, a city strung out for kilometres along the coast isn't just an amateur obsession. It is serious business in some of the most productive waters of the globe

Most of the shoreline for the 60 kilometres we drove from Rausu to Notsuke was lined with aspects of the fishing industry — lots of artificial boat harbours, lots of bobs nets being prepared or repaired and mountains of float balls to support the nets. We had been intrigued in Utoro to see a very tall crane being used to string out many metres of floats lines coming off a trawler. This must be a very beautiful coastline but alas we could see little of it due to the prevailing very dense fog at sea level. We had hoped to see some of the killer whales that occupy these very productive waters in prodigious numbers from a vantage point but that idea had to be abandoned.

We deviated from the usual circuit to add another 50 kilometres to see the Notsuke Ramsar sites where a 28 kilometre long low sand spit encloses a vast tidal wetland. It was said to be a significant stopover for more than 20,000 migratory birds every autumn and spring but by the time we arrived all of the birds had flown and we sat in the Wetlands visitor Centre and looked out with anticipation for an hour while we ate lunch but saw only two sightings. It was disappointing. We were rewarded though as we drove back along this sandspit, wondering how it might fare in a tsunami, to see three red-crowned cranes and a white tailed eagle feeding in the shallows but very little other birdlife.

One notable discovery was that the raptor we had most frequently seen was a Black Kite. It is the same Black Kite that lives in Northern Australia where it seems to

prefer the hot dry weather. Here it was well adapted to weather in stark contrast to its preferred habitat in Australia.

The road back to Abashiri wasn't as scenic as the high Shiretoko Pass but the flowering cherry trees were a reminder that this is the "Land of the Cherry Blossom". Flowers turned out to be a feature of our next stop of the day.



The Tofutsu Ramsar Wetland is a large saline lagoon near Abashiri and described as an important habitat for more than 60,000 ducks and geese. There was a viewing platform in an elaborate building with an earthen roof. We went there with eager anticipation but saw nothing but horse grazing in the wetland environs.

With a sense of feeling cheated we stopped at the Visitor Centre a kilometre further down the road and discovered that the grazing horses were there as an act of deliberate policy to control weeds without harming a prized wildflower that grew there. The Visitor Centre was focused more on the Koshimizu Natural Flower Garden that straddled the railway line and between the rail and shorelines on the coastal dunes. Here the locals had used fire as a tool to clear the area and encourage more than 40 species of wildflowers.



We quickly relaxed into the Toyoko Hotel that had a bed and wifi and bonus bed and breakfast meals. It enabled us to catch up a little with our Emails.

Saturday, 26th May
Hokkaido
Abashiri to Wakknai

The day began with grey skies as we breakfasted at the very comfortable Toyoko Hotel near the Abashiri Railway Station where we were to catch the train 9.50 am. The train was a fast express heading to Sapporo but we changed trains at Asashikawa before Sapporo to head north to the most northern city of Japan, Wakknai. It was drizzling rain which got heavier at times during the day as we sped through the verdant green countryside. The first part of the journey covered some mountainous areas with deep valleys and mountains high.



One of the many meticulously prepacked meals on the sold on the Sapporo Express. No food was sold on the second leg to Wakknai

After changing trains to a three car commuter train to Wakknai though there were few hills and lots more urbanization and for the first time on this trip extensive paddy fields that were just being planted up with rice. The train allowed us a sort of cockpit view and a couple of times we had to stop to avoid deer feeding on the rail line. It is a rail line we plan to travel again in the reverse direction in a few days' time.

Arriving at a stop before Wakknai we walked to our nearby minshuku that was adequate but surprisingly expensive because there seems a shortage of tourist accommodation in Wakknai, probably because it isn't really a town focussed on tourism.

We had Japanese snacks on the train and decided to go for a stroll to get a light dinner. Su was set on a noodle meal and eventually we found a place. It was quite memorable for the woman who ran it and served a magnificent meal. It was not surprising that this unobtrusive restaurant should boast so many certificates.

What was most memorable was that the whole meals was prepared by the owner without any assistance. She was a diminutive woman of character shuffled about due to her age. She looked to be well into her 80s and

probably near 90. One man, possibly a grandson, came in, had a beer, looked around and spoke briefly and kindly to the old lady to say he was just checking on her welfare.



Octagenarian Wakknai Restauranter served us an amazing noodle dinner.

Sunday, 27th May
Hokkaido
Wakknai and Rebun Island

It was another grey day but at least not raining except for a light scotch mist. As it turned out this was our coldest day to date. The temperature remained at less than 10°C throughout the grey day with a wind chill factor dropping that further. Despite the low thick cloud it remained fine throughout the day and we remained rugged up and well prepared for the chill.

We went down to find our boots carefully laid out ready and waiting for us to step into to board the owners's vehicle so that he could drive us to the ferry terminal.



One of the ferries servicing Rishiri and Rebun, Japans most northerly islands. This was our third boat trip in seven days (including Akan Lake and Shiretoko

The ferry was a very large ship, *Cypria Soya*. It provided a very comfortable ride despite the two metre waves. Unfortunately Second Class seemed to have no seats, only a large open carpeted floor to sit or lie on.

However as we berthed at Rishiri Island Su discovered the real second-class cabin with comfortable seats. We were better prepared for our return trip and rushed on to the *Boreas Soya* expecting the same seats, but Alas! The main seating lounge was on the floor and most passengers crowded into the disabled lounge where there were a few bench seats.

Unfortunately the cloud obscured most of the perfect volcanic cone of Mt Rishiri that rises to 1721 metres. However we could see snow-drifts etching gullies on the slopes that were visible below the cloud.

We were destined for the lower, longer and more northern island of the two, Rebun, so we didn't disembark until we reached the Rebun ferry terminal at Kafuka. Here we squeezed into the smallest Toyota and with tips from the hirer on what to see we headed north.

Our first stop was at Lake Kushu where we went for a walk and were thrilled to discover among the wildflowers a lot of "Black Lilies" that are really orchids.



Rebun Island Black lilies found near Lake Kushu

Crossing the island to the west we discovered a small fishing port, Nishi-uedomari. It was quite picturesque but ascending the walking path to Cape Sukai's summit exposed us to a stunning seascape along a rugged coast featuring columns of basalt. We were also impressed by some flowers we encountered on the way.

Another short walking trail in the Rishiri-Rebun National Park provided an even more spectacular glimpses of the wildflowers for which Rebun is famous. We were quite exhilarated as we drove to the northernmost point of terrestrial Japan, Cape Sukoton. Time was running out on our four hour hire car so we paused only long enough and were lucky enough to spy three seals swimming on the surface back to the rocky resting place.

We interrupted our return to Kafuka with just one stop to look in at the Alpine Botanic Gardens. It was Sunday afternoon and the height of the Spring wildflower season and we were astonished to discover

that we were the only visitors for the half-hour we paused there. It was though a stop well worthwhile as the gardens featured glorious displays of most of the wildflowers we had seen plus others and we could get so much closer to them than in the wild and it was well worth the 300 yen admission. They were brilliant gardens in full display but "*many a flower was born to blush unseen*" here as long as the island residents fail to appreciate its magnificence.



Tokiko at the top of Japan, the farthest point of Rebun Island where we were privileged to see seals swimming in the Sea of Japan

The highlight of our day was probably seeing the diverse and colourful Rebun wildflowers. I probably photographed more than 20 species alone in the few hours ashore. So on a day where we were not anticipating, we were treated to some splendid sights on Rebun, the northern most island in Japan.

We ended the day trying to find the old lady's restaurant again but when we did it was closed. We settled for a nearby alternative run by a very efficient and pleasant man and it turned out to be at least as interesting and pleasant meal as we had last night. From a day that started with no great expectations it was a very full and satisfying day.



These Rebun Island endemic ground orchids were among about 50 primeval flower species we photographed during a thrilling four-hour exploration of this island.

Monday, 28th May
Hokkaido
Wakknai to Tomakomai

From our minshuku window the weather outside looked to be a bit raw but we were well prepared as we walked to the nearby railway station in temperature of about 9°-10°C. However as the Tilt train rolled on about 40 kilometre's to our first destination, Toyotomi, the sun came out and illuminated a second instalment of the mile high (1700+ metres) Mt Rishiri because the bottom half which we had seen yesterday was now shrouded in cloud.

We had left quite early to catch the early train but we dawdled around Toyotomi because the local advice was that it would take less than an hour to take in and get an appreciation of the Sarobetsu Ramsar wetland. Eventually though we caught a local bus. We didn't disembark at the Visitor Centre at first but continued on to the beach before returning to have breakfast and explore this wetland area of 7,000 hectares of peat-based wetlands. Although half the wetlands area has been lost to agriculture and industrialization it remains the largest area of peat-land in Japan and with Rishiri and Rebun forms part of the northernmost National Park in Japan. Like its two other parts this section is renowned for its wildflowers although we noted today that they weren't as well advanced as those on Rebun.

With Kurishiro, Akan, and Shiretoko, this was the fourth of the six Japanese National Parks in Hokkaido we have visited in the last week. The concept of Japanese National Park's is quite interesting because this park includes 11.8% private land and 6.1% public land (presumably roads and utilities etc.) and 82.2% government land. Luckily for us it was a fine day and the temperature rose progressively through to the top teens.



This dredge was once used to extract the peat from over 170 hectares of the Sarobetsu wetlands. Peat extraction and drainage continues and the wetlands are slowly drying out. This wildflowers here are complementary to the diversity seen on Rebun Island

The wetlands are slowly being invaded by Bamboo Grass. That seems to indicate that the wetlands are drying out. Our taxi driver described the transformation as being relatively swift as he remembered it as all open wetlands not so long ago and now blanketed with Bamboo grass. This is hardly surprising considering the huge drainage ditches beside the roads running through the wetlands and the industrialization (quarrying) occurring of peat for the horticultural industries. At the visitor Centre is an exhibit of a large dredge used right through the 1970s to extract the peat. The peat is from 3 to 7 metres deep.



The mile high (!721 metre) Mt Rishiri is visible from almost everywhere in the Sarobetsu Wetlands

The Visitor Centre provided by the Ministry of Environment had a great interpretation of the peat that began forming when sea-levels rose 6,000 years ago and coastal dunes dammed up a large river outlet. It also included a small privately run retail outlet where we had curry and rice for breakfast that was curiously named a Rest House.

I was keen to pursue the issue I had noted in Shiretoko of the impact of raccoons that had escaped from being domestic pets and are now a threat to the integrity of much of natural Hokkaido's ecology (just like cane toads in Australia).

A taxi picked us up and took us back to Toyotomi where we had a takeaway lunch and caught a train at 240 pm bound for Sapporo, the capital and largest city in Hokkaido and the fourth largest in Japan. We quickly changed trains and travelled on another hour to Tomakomai, arriving at 8.30 p.m. and settled in a comfortable Toyoko Inn for the cold wet night outside.

Tuesday, 29th May
Hokkaido
Utonai-ko Wetland to Hakodate

Outside it is still raining and it looks very wet and cold. We are well prepared. Luckily though the weather was yet again not raining while we were exposed. It seems a little like Camelot where it *“only rains after sundown and by 8.00 o’clock the morning sun will appear.”*

We made our way to the near-by bus station and then caught the 9.30 am bus. It was also joined by six 11y.o. primary-school students who were coincidentally and independently making their way to the Wetlands Centre where they had an appointment with the Ranger for their school project. It was a great example of independence and a great demonstration of leadership of the group by a girl who sat in front of us.

At the Wetlands Centre provided and operated by the Ministry of Environment the Ranger immediately started briefing the students and they were rapt in attention and diligently taking notes. It was an amazing demonstration of independence.



A Ranger instructs these 11 y.o. primary school children who had travelled independently to the Utonai-ko Wetlands Centre. The interpretation facilities were magnificent and the Ranger stands on a model of the lake.

We made a walk along the lake-shore traversing a surprisingly dodgy board walk that was broken in places and more than a bit dodgy in others. We saw a few swans in the distance left behind when the main mass migrated a few weeks ago as well as other good bird sightings that included a crow giving chase to an eagle after quite a rowdy ultimatum issued to the raptor. On our return at this place a black kite and a crow were feeding on quite a sizeable and freshly headless fish that they had presumably won by driving off the raptor.

Having thanked the ranger for his assistance and posted a letter we may our way back into Tomakomai to do a minor shop, lunch and catch the 2.01 p.m. train to Hakodate. The line hugged the coastline most of the way passing an endless ribbon strip of fishing villages.

We surmised how these people living so close to the low seashore might fare in a tsunami and when we were in Hakodate we learnt first hand by the 1.5 metre wall of water that surged through parts of the city and the havoc it wrought. We arrived at the station at 4.30 pm and settled in a very comfortable nearly hotel with a slightly larger room. We wandered the waterfront and were found by an enterprising restuaranter World Heritage led us into his very standard restaurant for a very good meal.



Utonai-ko was one of six Ramsar wetlands we visited in Hokkaido. Each has its own Visitor Centre. Some such as Sarobetsu have more than one. It would be great to see a Ramsar Visitor Centre on Great Sandy Strait at Maaroom or Mary River Heads

Wednesday, 30th May
Hokkaido
Hakodate

For our last full day in Hokkaido it dawned into a fine and warm day. Too warm even for a jacket. After a marvellous 500 yen each breakfast above the markets, we returned to our hotel.



Su eyes off our bargain breakfast for just 500 yen each.

I had identified and written down five highlights of Hakodate we should try to experience — Mt Hakodate,

Fort Goryokaku, the historic district of Motomachi the the warehouse area of the old waterfront.

We were unsure about how to fit all this in but started at the nearby bus station thinking to go to Mt Hakodate before the weather changed but the first bus didn't leave until 9.40 so we headed to Fort Goryokaku instead. This was an old fort to protect the Shogun appointed Magistrate, the equivalent of an Australian colonial governor in powers. It was surrounded by a star shaped wall and moat that are now adorned ornamental cherry trees and azalias.



The Magistrate's house inside Fort Goryokaku is the equivalent of Government House in Sydney except that battles have been fought for the right to occupy this position

There were limited bus services to Fort Goryokaku so we went for a ride while on our way back to the Bus Station that took us to a Convent set up by Trappistine nuns 150 years ago. They epitomized the Western influences penetrating the Japanese culture and a symbol that Hakodate and Nagasaki were the first two ports in Japan to be opened to western trading.

I thought that we were then going up the 334 metre Mt Hakodate but there was a misunderstanding between Su and I about where we were going. Happily though Su had met and engaged with a very talkative and informative woman who insisted on showing us a "people's park." Urban parks are relatively uncommon in Hokkaido but this one exists on a relatively steep hillside in the most up-market suburb of Hakodate, Motomachi, as a monument to public pressure to stop the whole urban landscape being paved or built over. The woman was an artist who lived nearby and went to the park daily and showed us its features with justifiable pride.

Motomachi had been on our agenda but I hadn't anticipated arriving here without realizing it. We then set off for a walk to explore this suburb that was so applauded. We soon found the Russian Orthodox Church and the Catholic cathedral. Nearby we went on a tour of a grand house in Japanese style of the philanthropist, Teppai Soma. This was a very interesting insight into the life and lifestyle of one man

who in the early part of the 20th Century paid more in personal income tax than anyone else in the country. Further in 1907 when a fire destroyed 12,000 houses and the city public hall as well as a lot of his property, he provided over two thirds of the cost to build a new and grand public hall and theatre for the people of Hakodate — just one of his many generous bequests.

We continued walking down to the warehouse area where we had a very belated light lunch at Starbucks and then returned to our hotel for an hour.

We caught the 6.20 bus up to Mt Hakodate summit to see this most attractive city in daylight as well as in darkness on the clearest evening we experienced in ten days in Hokkaido. It was a bus journey well worth taking and while when we arrived the place was almost deserted when we left at 7.40 pm there was virtually no more room for any buses or taxis at the top of the mountain, or for that matter little space for people shuffling shoulder to shoulder around the viewing areas. I was happy with our experience and left before I got crowd claustrophobia

We had a wonderful seafood dinner, more upmarket than any others and made our way back to our hotel.



With a population of 280,000, historic Hakodate is the third largest city in Hokkaido and probably its most attractive. The night view of the city below is claimed as one of the top three-night city scenes in the world with Naples and Hong Kong. Below Motomachi churches.



**Thursday, 31st May
Leaving Hokkaido
Hakodate to Ungandji**

With the alarm set for 5.30 a.m., I awoke at 4.25 thinking I was just five minutes before alarm. I could be forgiven because the sun was already shining on many of the buildings outside and it was an almost cloudless warm day. The early sunrise was a reminder that Hokkaido is further east than most of the rest of Japan (yet on the same time zone) and also closer to the land of the midnight sun.

Su went down to the markets to stock up with fresh fish we could carry to Ungandji. She returned at 6.15 with some breakfast snacks. She was very happy with her shopping. The premature awakening resulted in a lazy start to the finest day we had yet seen in Hokkaido and after a lazy morning we were leaving for a quiet ten days in Ungandji, the place where Su grew up and where her eldest sister Tok-chan still lives on the ancestral Suzuki farm that she works alone at 85.

We caught four trains and two buses for the day. The first train was a two hour run from Hakodate to Aomori that took us through the 54 kilometre long Seikan Tunnel. Only 23 kilometres were actually under the sea but at its deepest point deep the tunnel is 240 metres below sea-level with 140 metres of that being the seabed.



We experienced a lot of the very efficient JR rail service during the day. The Shinkansen that we caught to Sendai and other faster trains operated on a 1435 mm (4'8") standard gauge, whereas the local trains operated on the same gauge as Queensland, 1067 mm (3'6").

From Sendai the Shinkansen went express to Tokyo so we changed to another fast train that stopped at intermediate stations. It took only an hour to Nasu Shiriobara and we were reminded of the disaster that befell Japan as we passed through Fukushima. At Nasu Shiriobara we changed trains yet again for a local train that took us on to Otowa (about an hour) where we caught a bus and changed it yet again for another to

Ungandji. The second bus driver remembered taking me there two years ago.

Little has changed at the Suzuki home. Although Tok Chan's advancing age is taking its toll, she still rides her beloved motor scooter to get her around the village.

The rest of our stay is likely to cover little extraordinary events so from here I won't continue with the daily entries unless events warrant it.

-o0o-



Among the sulphurous fumaroles on Mt Nasudake above 1,700 m (mile high) level

Summary of Hokkaido Experiences

The people of Hokkaido are the most patient and courteous of all people I have encountered in my travels. Nothing seemed to be too much trouble. We circled most of the island taking in the south, east and most northern coasts. Our interests were principally in the Hokkaido nature that remains more intact than almost anywhere else in Japan.

I gained a lot from this ten-day study tour, probably more than I had in my two previous study tours of Japanese World Heritage areas — cultural in Kyoto and Nikko and natural at Yakushima and Kirakami. I have written separate reports on what I learnt from Shiretoko World Heritage area and its management. If one ignored the latitude, geography and geology and substituted peninsula for island, orcas for humpback whales, bears for dingoes, there are many similarities in the problems of management of each. I also gained new perspectives on Visitor Centres that may be useful in considering a Fraser Island World Heritage Visitor Centre/Centres and possibly even a Ramsar Visitor Centre for Great Sandy Strait.

I enjoyed visiting the Ramsar but the bird numbers we saw there were well below our expectations. I was probably basing these on bird numbers in Australia rather than on bird numbers I have observed in America and other places I have visited in the northern hemisphere. However our visit's object was to explore protected area management rather than its biota.