

## 2 Nature around Human Habitats

### Bolting Hokkaido Sika Deer

Watch out! A male Hokkaido sika deer just bolted into the road.

The number of automobile crashes involving Hokkaido sika deer continues to increase amid the recent explosive growth in the native Hokkaido sika deer population. There have also been many occasions where Hokkaido sika deer have snarled railway transport, because they were either hit by a train or on the tracks, causing delays. Agricultural losses now amount to billions of yen every year because crops are eaten by Hokkaido sika deer.

The overgrown Hokkaido sika deer population has also had a negative impact on local ecosystems, since they eat tree bark in the winter causing the trees to dry out and die. We must remember, however, that humans, too, are responsible for the increase in the Hokkaido sika deer population.

Nearly all of Hokkaido was covered in forests at the end of the 19th century when full-scale settlement and development began. Yet, today most of the prefecture's plains have been transformed into cities and farmland. The remaining forests, too, are mainly newer growth and very few can be called primeval.

Nevertheless, in Sapporo, a major city of nearly two million, there are forests where brown bears live. These bears can occasionally be seen in residential neighborhoods. One of Hokkaido's unique features is that people live in close proximity to vibrant nature. Humans are no strangers to the various forms of interconnectedness of life. This is because people's activities can impact the way of life of animals and plants living nearby. On the other hand, the presence of wildlife can also impact humans' way of life as well.

Hokkaido sika deer, which were on the verge of extinction at the end of the 19th century, have seen a sharp increase in their population in recent years. This is believed to be because of easy access to food sources from pasturelands and the increase in planted forests where they can spend winter.

There are also animals whose behavior was changed because of human activity. Today we can find fox scavenging on the side of roads in search of food. There has also been an increase in the number of slaty-backed gull making nests and raising young atop buildings in downtown Sapporo. These birds normally nest on sea cliffs.

An increase in alien species is also a serious problem. The buff-tailed bumblebee was introduced to pollinate tomatoes grown in greenhouses, but it soon became feral and spread rapidly. Now it is in competition for honey with the native bumblebee species. If the native bumblebee species disappear, the plants to which these bumblebees brought pollen will be effected as well.

The ecosystems of Hokkaido, which were created over hundreds of thousands of years, have changed a great deal over just the past several hundred years. Today, we need to consider how humans and wildlife can live in harmony together.



### Living Close to Humans

Large wildlife live in close proximity to cities and roads in Hokkaido. These include the Hokkaido sika deer, which has caused agricultural damage and traffic accidents, and the brown bear, which travels down from the mountains in search of food in urban areas. If wildlife and humans live too close together, occasionally their interests will collide. Foxes and jungle crow scrounge around in people's garbage. Slaty-backed gulls now nest and raise their young atop buildings instead of sea cliffs. This shows that some of these animals have chosen to live near humans and take advantage of our living habits.



### New Intruders

"Alien species" refer to those living things brought to Hokkaido from other countries or Honshu and other islands in Japan. The number of alien species has been on the rise recently. Not only does the entry and sustained presence of alien species negatively impact people's lives in some cases, but it also poses the risk of greatly affecting Hokkaido's ecosystems. Raccoons now inhabit nearly every corner of the prefecture, eating and damaging corn, strawberries and other crops along the way. Now that raccoons inhabit Nopporo Forest Park, the native grey heron can no longer nest there, and large quantities of Ezo salamander have been eaten.