



THE STATION WITH A CAT AS ITS STATIONMASTER

Wakayama Electric Railway's Kishi Station

Tama Museum Kishi Station, with its distinctive roof incorporating a cat design (Designed by ELJI MITOOKA + DON DESIGN ASSOCIATES)
Photo: Sato Kumiko

Kishi Station on the Wakayama Electric Railway Kishigawa Line is famous for its stationmaster cat.

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CATS have been kept from time immemorial in Japan and around the world for their useful ability to catch rats and mice. It is known that, in the United Kingdom, cats have been officially employed as Chief Mouser to the Cabinet Office since 1924.

In more recent times, cats in Japan like many other countries are less often used as rat catchers, instead being kept almost exclusively as pets. However, since 2007, a cat has been serving as stationmaster at Kishi Station on the 14-kilometer-long Wakayama Electric Railway Kishigawa Line, which connects Wakayama City and Kinokawa City in Wakayama Prefecture in the Kinki region.

The historic Kishigawa Line opened in 1916, but the number of users gradually declined over time, and in 2004 a decision was made by the then operator to close the railroad line. However, backed by local residents who were eager to keep the line, the local government called for a company to take over. As a result, Okayama Electric Tramway Co., Ltd. of the Ryobi Group in Okayama Prefecture established the new Wakayama Electric Railway Co., Ltd. and took over the operation of the Kishigawa Line from 2006.

One issue that arose when the new company was developing its operating structure was the cats, which had up to then been taken care of by the people who ran a store next to Kishi Station. The house on the public road next to the store where the cats lived had to be moved due to the land development around the station. The owner of the store approached Kojima Mitsunobu, the president of Wakayama Electric Railway, to see whether there was any way the cats could stay in the station.

“When the president actually met the cats, he felt that the eyes of a female calico cat (a cat with a three-colored coat) called Tama conveyed a sense of purpose as strong as any of his employees’—call it his businessman’s intuition if you like. So he decided to let Tama stay in Kishi Station as the stationmaster and let the other two cats remain as her assistants,” says Yamaki Yoshiko of Ryobi Group’s Public Relations Department.

News of the unprecedented event of a cat assuming the post of stationmaster instantly spread across Japan, and many passengers began to visit Kishi Station to get a look at the dignified and adorable stationmaster cat in her miniature stationmaster hat. The story was also picked up by the international media, and Tama the stationmaster cat began to attract fans from overseas.

The stationmaster and her assistants generally worked the daytime shift Monday through Saturday, from 10:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. in winter and 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. in summer. Tama sat at her favorite ticket gate, greeting and seeing off



The late Tama, the first stationmaster cat
 Photo: Courtesy of Wakayama Electric Railway Co., Ltd.



Tama Jinja shrine on the platform at Kishi Station
 Photo: Sato Kumiko

passengers. After a year in the job, the reputation of the stationmaster cat spread and even more people came to visit Kishi Station to see the cats. This led to the remodeling of the station in 2010. The new station building had a distinctive roof shaped like a cat, and included a stationmaster's office for Tama.

Tama's ability to attract customers far exceeded the company's expectations and she received promotion after promotion. In 2008, she was knighted and awarded the title of the first Wakayama de Knight (a pun on "It's got to be Wakayama" in Japanese) by the Wakayama prefectural governor, in recognition of her contribution to promoting local tourism. Likewise, in 2011 she was awarded the title Wakayama Prefecture Tourism Mascot Daimyojin (great deity). In 2013, Tama became Acting President of Wakayama Electric Railway, and in 2014 Ultra Stationmaster. Tama passed away in 2015, mourned by her many fans. She was given the posthumous title Honorary Eternal Stationmaster.

Tama's successor as stationmaster was a calico cat known as "Stationmaster Tama II" or Nitama (literally "Tama the Second"), who had graduated from the Training School for Cat Stationmasters. The training school is a facility of Okayama Electric Tramway, where cats live comfortably and spend time with tourists. The cats do not receive specific stationmaster training. Rather, they are assessed for their aptitude for the role, such as being able to get on with various types of people and being able to tolerate wearing a hat. Cats that are suitable are assigned to a station.

Nitama had been working at Kishi Station as a substitute stationmaster on Sundays, which was stationmaster Tama's day off. However, after Tama's death, she was promoted to stationmaster. Nitama has performed the stationmaster's duties

admirably and is just as popular as Tama. At the beginning of this year (2022), she received a letter of promotion to the position of acting president. Since 2018, a calico cat named Yon-tama ("Tama Four") has been serving as the stationmaster at Idakiso Station. Like Nitama, her aptitude for the role of stationmaster was discovered at the training center.

The spirit of Tama, the first stationmaster cat, is enshrined in the Tama Jinja shrine on the platform of Kishi Station, her final abode. From here, she continues to watch over the work of her successors. 7



Nitama, the current stationmaster of Kishi Station
 Photo: Courtesy of Wakayama Electric Railway Co., Ltd.