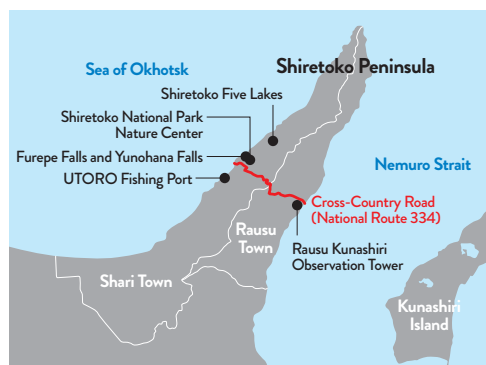


Snowscape Overlooking Drift Ice in the UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site of Shiretoko

The Shiretoko Peninsula is in the northeastern part of Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost region. During winter, the shores of Shiretoko witness the arrival of drift ice. We spoke with Imura Daisuke from the Utoro Nature Conservation Office under the Ministry of the Environment to learn more about the snowscapes and dynamic drift ice of Shiretoko Peninsula. (Text: Morohashi Kumiko)



Shiretoko Peninsula

The Shiretoko Peninsula is a slender landmass, approximately 70km in length and 25km in width at its base. It faces the Sea of Okhotsk to the west and the Nemuro Strait to the east. The coastal region marks the southernmost point in the Northern Hemisphere where drift ice makes landfall. Recognized for its rich ecosystem connecting from the ice-influenced sea to the land, the majority of the peninsula and its surrounding waters, totaling 71,000 hectares (48,700 hectares on land and 22,300 hectares at sea), earned UNESCO World Natural Heritage status in 2005 under the name "Shiretoko."

The coastline on the western side of the peninsula, primarily near Shari Town, features continuous cliffs towering over 100 meters. This formation is the result of intense erosion by drift ice on lava that once flowed

from the volcanic activity of the peninsula. There are also numerous instances of underground water flowing through the lava, forming waterfalls that cascade from the cliffs, such as the Furepe Falls, and flow into the Sea of Okhotsk. On the other hand, the eastern side of the peninsula, primarily near Rausu Town, where drift ice does not make forceful landfall, features a relatively gentle coastline.

Winter on the Shiretoko Peninsula is blanketed in snow, with drift ice arriving around February, creating a distinctive snowy landscape. Guided tours, allowing participants to walk on the drift ice floating on the sea surface, are conducted during this season. In addition, wintering animals like the Steller's sea eagle, arriving from the harsh cold regions, reveal their presence within the snowy scenery. Due to the freezing

Drift ice off the coast of Shiretoko in February





Photo: Ministry of the Environment

Drift ice comes to the shoreline for shorter periods with each passing year.

of ice and snow, one can experience the snowy landscapes from the surface of the Shiretoko Five Lakes, a sight not available in other seasons.

According to Imura, the opportunity to enjoy the dynamic snowy landscapes with drift ice is relatively brief. He says, “The cross-country road connecting the eastern and western parts of the Shiretoko Peninsula (National Route 334) closes around November 8 due to freezing at the mountain pass, making passage impossible. This marks the start of winter in Shiretoko. Snowfall occurs from December to March. Drift ice often doesn’t arrive until the latter half of January, with February being the more reliable time to see it. By mid-March, it is often pushed back towards the open sea by the wind, disappearing from view,” he says.

In winter, the Shiretoko National Park Nature Center, positioned near the midpoint of the western coastline (commonly known as the “Utoro side”), represents the furthest accessible point through public transportation. The walking trail located behind the Center is perfect for those seeking to enjoy the snowy landscapes overlooking drift ice.

“We recommend exploring some of Shiretoko’s renowned attractions like the Furepe Falls and Yunohana Falls, nicknamed ‘Men’s Tears’. These two waterfalls, resembling works of ice art, can be best experienced by walking through the primeval forest,” explains Imura. “The frozen Furepe Falls¹ along the cliffs at the endpoint are particularly breathtaking. Also, the view of the coastal scenery of Rausu Town on the opposite side of the peninsula to the east, where drift ice arrives, is amazing from the Rausu Kunashiri Observation Tower.”

The forests and towns are blanketed in snow, and looking out to sea, it’s a vast expanse of drift ice. The majestic, entirely white winter landscape is



Photo: Ministry of the Environment

Above: The Furepe Falls freeze into aqua-blue pillars of ice.

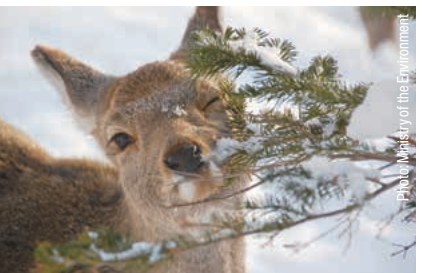


Photo: Ministry of the Environment

Below: There’s a chance of unexpectedly encountering wildlife during a stroll, like the Yezo sika deer.

an incredible spectacle unique to the Shiretoko Peninsula during a brief period in winter.

Recently, there has been an increasing number of tourists from overseas visiting to appreciate the beautiful snowy landscapes and drift ice.

“For visitors from countries or regions accustomed to snow, we recommend participating in eco-tours around the Shiretoko Five Lakes during winter,” says Imura. “Wearing snowshoes² allows you to stroll across the frozen lake surface, offering a unique opportunity to enjoy a different snowy landscape from the usual Shiretoko experience.”

There are also tours offering drift ice walking in the waters off Utoro, which are popular among tourists from Southeast Asia, China, and other regions less accustomed to snow.”

“Tour participants wear dry suits when walking on the ice and sometimes break through it to immerse themselves waist-deep in the sea, providing perfect photo opportunities and a lot of fun,” comments Imura.

According to Imura, “When the drift ice arrives, the waves on the sea disappear, and Shiretoko is enveloped in silence. The sight of snow gently accumulating on the drift ice is an indescribable scene.”

Due to the impact of global warming, the drift ice has been thinning each year, so the period to enjoy it has become shorter. The majestic sight is something everyone should witness at least once. **7**



Photo: Shiretoko Optional Tours SOTI



Photo: SHINRA/Shiretoko Nature Guide Tour Inc.

Above: A winter eco-tour of the Shiretoko Five Lakes

Below: Drift ice walks are popular with tourists



Photo: Ministry of the Environment

Steller’s sea eagles fly onto the drift ice to spend the winter there.

1. Frozen waterfalls occur when the flowing water from the falls freezes upon exposure to the cold air.
2. One of the tools for walking easily on the snow, similar to western-style crampons.