

# Wild Life East and West

By Jacqueline Ruyak

Deer, it seems, are threatening to overrun Japan. The single major cause of crop damage here, deer have become more than a nuisance to Japanese farmers and gardeners. Between *yezo-shika* in Hokkaido and the common Japanese deer elsewhere, the deer population is reported to be going wild. When I heard this news on the radio here in Iwate Prefecture, my immediate thought was, welcome to Pennsylvania.

For about 10 years now I have divided my time between rural Pennsylvania, about an hour and a half by car from New York, and rural Iwate, about four hours by train from Tokyo. One reason I moved to Pennsylvania was to raise organic vegetables and herbs, which I did for several years, as many as 50 varieties a season. Someday I may do it again, but for the past two years the garden has been a tangle of towering weeds and sumacs. One by one, my neighbors too have given up on their gardens. Like me, they have been defeated by deer.

When I now look out the window on a summer evening, I usually see four to eight deer grazing under the apple tree, foraging in what used to be a garden, nibbling on the herbs that edge the lawn. Add to that the rabbits, ground hogs, raccoons, opossum, skunks, squirrels, voles, moles, chipmunks and other small creatures common in this part of the countryside, and the garden had no chance. I guess the animals wanted it more than I did. Instead, there is a deer park, once a preserve of the rich, in my back yard.

As in Japan, no one knows for sure why the Pennsylvania population of white-tailed deer has gotten out of hand. Some blame it on a lack of natural predators or point to a dramatic decline in hunting. Others say rampant development has driven deer and other animals from their natural habitats to forage where they are able. Maybe the



Photo: Yoshinari SUZUKI

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deer just decided it was time to multiply.

Whatever the reason, no one seems to know what to do about it. Extending hunting seasons for bucks and does, introducing predators, sterilizing deer or otherwise trying to curb population growth have all been considered. While experts discuss ways and means, deer continue to ravage fields and gardens. In Pennsylvania, they also carry disease-spreading ticks and cause accidents. This past summer alone I saw at least 50 dead deer, hit by cars, along the roads of eastern Pennsylvania.

Come to think of it though, except for the greedy herd in Nara Park, any of which will coolly walk away with your lunch, I have never seen a deer in Japan. The closest I have come, and that was only in name, was one recent morning in Iwate when I threw open the curtains and saw, to my disbelief, a pair of *kamo-shika* in the snow-covered garden. Though *shika* is Japanese for deer, the *kamo-shika* is the Japanese serow, a goat-like antelope with short

horns.

I had often seen *kamo-shika* tracks but the creatures themselves I had only seen from a distance, as they flitted from field to forest. But here were two, mother and kid, both with dark coats, golden eyes and oddly baggy bodies, feeding on the yews about three meters from my window. While I flailed in vain for my camera, the kid disappeared. The mother, meanwhile, came closer and closer, before moseying around the corner of the house and up into the woods behind. When I later mentioned the duo to my neighbor up the lane, she said with a smile, "Oh, they're always in our garden. They've about ruined all the trees. But they're friendly creatures. Did you call them? They'll actually come close when you call them."

My first close encounter with Iwate wildlife occurred days after moving into my old house. I had opened the windows in a back room to air it out; late that afternoon when I went to close them, the room was alive with bees.



Not a couple of bees or even a couple dozen of bees but hundreds and hundreds, maybe thousands, of buzzing bees. Minutes later, luckily for me, not so for the bees, a man from the local co-op showed up, curious to see what this American was up to in an old farmhouse. When I showed him the room, he ran for his truck and a spray can of bug killer. A man who knows bees later told me that a queen bee had probably been trying to move her hive into the closet in that room.

In Pennsylvania it's bats in the attics and voles in the cellar. In Iwate, the wild things have for the most part stayed outside, though I have become accustomed to coming back from trips and finding acorns squirreled away in the *futon* (duvet), mouse nests in knapsacks and bird nests in coat sleeves. Living with nature is what people here call it.

Most of the *tanuki*, or raccoon dogs, I've seen in Iwate have been roadkill. All I've seen of bears here or there are claw marks on trees. Rabbit tracks are common here but I've yet to see a live rabbit, unlike in Pennsylvania where they thump about the fields. Foxes, however, are the animals that define Iwate for me. The woods around here seem rife with dens of foxes. I have often watched foxes, late in the afternoon, roughhousing with their young in the field fronting my house or glimpsed them slipping by moonlight through that same field. One brilliant winter day, as I was trudging down that field, I noticed fox tracks crossing the path I



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and others had made in the knee-deep snow. My eyes idly followed the tracks and I froze. Just meters away stood a fox, looking at me over his shoulder. We exchanged looks, then he turned and we went our separate ways.

What I miss the most when away, though, is the sound of the foxes in the woods. Come nightfall, their frenetic, hoarse barking can be heard for hours on end. There's something intriguing yet reassuring about the low-key uproar they make night after night. One morning, though, the farmwoman down the way complained to me that the racket the foxes made was keeping her up. "Tell me," she said, "why do they say that foxes go *kon-kon* when the noise they make is nothing at all like that?" I had to laugh. Of course, I have no idea why Japanese think foxes go *kon-kon*, but I had been sure till then that I was alone in noticing how offbase that bit of onomatopoeia was.

They say that foxes have made a comeback in Pennsylvania, but I have seen only one there, and that was late one night last summer. Wild turkeys, on the other hand, are back in numbers. There's a flock of about 20 of the drab, gawky birds that sometimes peck their way through the back field. Only once have I seen them in full display, a sight that dazzled me with its sudden beauty. Once common in eastern Pennsylvania, pheasants, though, are now scarce. Not so in Iwate, where one winter a flashy cock took up residence with a harem of hens

in a corner of the front yard.

Those older and wiser tell me that there used to be more songbirds in our state. Perhaps, but it is no silent spring in my part of Pennsylvania, where mornings are filled with a complex orchestral celebration unlike any I have heard elsewhere. One unforgettable sound I do not hear there, however, is the high whistling cry of the kites in spring as they ride the thermal drafts that make this part of Iwate popular with hang gliders.

This question of the invisible deer here in Iwate bothered me. They do after all appear in books of Iwate wildlife. Neighbors assured me that there were deer deep in the mountains. Hmm, I wondered. Then the other day an organic farmer friend stopped by and I asked her. "I haven't seen them myself," she said, "but my husband has. In fact, he's seen families in the woods along our fields, so I guess there will soon be more." I looked at her with pity. "You have my sympathy," was all I said. But I still don't know why Japanese think that foxes go *kon-kon*. **JATI**

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Photo : Yoshinori SUZUKI



Kamo-shika or Japanese serow, a goat-like antelope with short horns