Sado Wildlife in Focus | Why Nearly 100 Ibises Vanished in a Year

野生動物を守る取り組みは、日本だけでなく世界各地で続けられています。新潟県の佐渡島でも、トキと人が共に生きる環境をつくろうとする努力が続いてきました。けれど自然の世界では、思い通りにいかないことも少なくありません。人の活動と自然環境のバランスを考えるとき、私たちはどんな視点を持つ必要があるのでしょうか。

1. Article

Read the following article aloud.

At the February meeting of the Toki (Japanese crested ibis) Reintroduction Review Committee, an announcement left me stunned. I say that as someone who has spent years on Sado Island photographing and observing these birds.

Since their first release into the wild in 2008, their population had been steadily increasing. So when the committee reported that their numbers had suddenly dropped by roughly 100 in a single year, I was desperate to understand what had happened.

The Japanese crested ibis is a nationally designated Special Natural Monument, but it had gone extinct in the wild. Plans for its return to Japanese skies are overseen by the environment ministry's Toki Reintroduction Review Committee, formed by a panel of experts.

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Japan Forward

1. Article

At a meeting in Tokyo on February 9, the committee decided that ibises will be released in Izumo City, Shimane Prefecture, around June 2027. Following Noto in Ishikawa Prefecture, this will be the second release site on Japan's main island.

Successfully releasing the birds requires steady efforts, including cooperation from farmers and understanding from local residents. For example, reducing pesticide use in rice paddies so that small animals, which serve as food for the ibises, can survive and help create a suitable habitat.

After the meeting, Izumo Mayor Toshiyuki Iizuka held an enthusiastic press conference, and the decision received widespread coverage in the Japanese media.

Meanwhile, the committee reported that, as of the end of December 2025, an estimated 473 ibises were living in the wild on Sado Island. The **estimate** for the same period in the previous year had been 576, meaning roughly 100 birds had disappeared in a single year.

For me, having moved to Sado to observe and photograph the ibises, this was far bigger news.

According to the environment ministry, four **factors** are thought to explain the decline.

The first is a change in the method used to estimate the population.
Previously, the estimate was calculated through statistical analysis based on the number of individuals whose survival had been confirmed within the past six months through leg bands and other markers.

Because the calculation is done every December, birds released in autumn (after July) were automatically counted as alive, even if they had not been confirmed, since they fell within the six-month window.

As the gap between estimated numbers and reality grew larger, this "six-month rule" was abolished. Instead, methods such as simultaneous counts at communal roosts are now used to produce more accurate estimates.

The second factor is the reduction in the number of birds released. In the past, 30–40 birds were released twice a year, but last year only nine were released.

In addition, during the 2025 breeding season, there was persistent bad weather such as heavy rain, and chicks were also preyed upon by **predators**. As a result, the number of chicks that successfully fledged fell from 129 the previous year to 76, a drop of more than 50.

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1. Article

Furthermore, 17 years have passed since the first release, and the number of birds reaching the end of their natural lifespan is increasing.

Another factor came to mind. In previous years, ibis flocks typically formed large groups of 20–30 birds, but last autumn they seemed smaller — around 10 birds — which I had found puzzling.

A weekly magazine had also reported that the number of ibises on Sado had grown so much that the population was becoming overcrowded.

When the number of birds increases, food must be shared among more individuals, and birds may start interfering with each other's breeding. This can lead to a natural decline in reproductive success, a phenomenon known as the "**density** effect."

Environmental changes are also a factor. The area of rice paddies on Sado was about 6,000 hectares when the first birds were released, but it has since decreased to about 5,000 hectares, reducing feeding grounds as well.

Professor Emeritus Hisashi Nagata of Niigata University, who has studied the ecology of the ibis for many years, says, "Last year, the density effect reduced both breeding success and survival rates. Revising the estimation method has brought the numbers closer to reality."

He adds that under Sado's current environmental conditions, around 500 birds may be the **optimal** population size.

Nature exists in a delicate balance. Until now, release programs have been designed mainly with the goal of increasing the population. But it may be time to shift policy toward release plans that match the environment's capacity.

In May, the first release on Honshu, Japan's main island, is planned in Noto, Ishikawa Prefecture. From now on, the stage for ibis releases will gradually move from Sado to the Japanese mainland.

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2. Key phrases and vocabulary

First repeat after your tutor and then read aloud by yourself.

1. estimate 推定
Scientists made an **estimate** of the number of bears living in the area.

2. factor 要因
Cost was an important **factor** in their choice of laptops.

3. predator 捕食者
Small fish hide under rocks to avoid **predators**.

4. density 密度
The population **density** in the city center is very high.

5. optimal 最適な
Morning is the **optimal** time for many people to study.

3. Questions

Read the questions aloud and answer them.

1. **Why did the government change the method used to estimate the ibis population?**
2. **How did weather and predators affect ibis chicks during the 2025 breeding season?**
3. **What environmental change on Sado Island has reduced feeding grounds for the ibises?**
4. **Why do you think it is difficult to balance wildlife protection and environmental limits?**
5. **What can farmers or local residents do to help protect wild birds?**

4. 【佐渡生き物語】トキの生息数が約100羽減少、その理由は！？

トキの野生復帰検討会で２月、トキを観測、撮影し続けている私にとって驚きの発表があった。佐渡で2008年に野生下でのトキ放鳥が初めて行われて以来、順調に生息数を伸ばしていたが一気に約100羽数を減らしたというのだ。一体、何が起こったのか。

いったん絶滅した国の特別天然記念物トキを日本の空に戻す取り組みの計画は、専門家らによる環境省のトキ野生復帰検討会で決められる。

２月９日に東京で開かれた検討会では、島根県出雲市で来年６月ごろ、放鳥することが決まった。石川県能登に次いで第２の本州での放鳥となる。

放鳥するためには、トキが生きられるように田んぼの農薬を減らしてトキのエサとなる小動物が生きていけるように環境を整えるなど農家の協力、住民の理解など地道な努力が必要となる。

出雲市の飯塚俊之市長は検討会に出席後、喜びの会見を行った。この様子はメディアに大きく報じられた。

一方、同じこの検討会で、2025年12月末時点で、佐渡の野外に生息するトキの推定生息数が473羽だったことが報告された。昨年、発表された前年同時期の推定生息数が576羽だったことから、１年間で約100羽のトキが減少したことになる。佐渡に移住してトキを撮影、観測してきた私にとってはこちらの方が大ニュースだった。

環境省によると、減少には４つの要因が考えられるという。

一つは、推定生息数の算出方法を変えたことだ。

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4. 【佐渡生き物語】トキの生息数が約100羽減少、その理由は！？

これまでは、過去６カ月以内に足環などで生存が確認された個体数を基礎に統計解析で計算する。計算は毎年12月に行っていることから、７月以降に放鳥された秋放鳥の個体は６カ月以内になるため、確認されなくても生存とみなして計算していた。推定生息数と現実との誤差が大きくなってきたことから、この６カ月ルールをやめ、ねぐらの一斉カウントなど、より正確になるように算出方法を変えたという。

もう一つは、放鳥数を減らしたことだ。これまでは年２回、計30～40羽を放していたが昨年は９羽にとどまった。

また、2025年は繁殖期に大雨など悪天候が続いたことや、天敵にヒナが捕食されるなどして、巣立ち数も前年の129羽から76羽と50羽あまり減少した。

さらに初放鳥から17年が経過し、寿命となる個体も増加しているという。

思い当たることがあった。例年20～30羽の大きな群れを作っていたトキの群れが、昨年秋は10羽程度と小さくなっており、不思議に思っていたのだ。

週刊誌が、佐渡でトキの数が増え過密状態になっていると取り上げたこともあった。

トキの数が増えると、エサの配分が減り、繁殖を邪魔しあって自然と繁殖成績が落ちる「密度効果」が起きてしまう。環境の変化もある。佐渡の水田の面積は初放鳥時には6000haだったが、今では5000haに減少、餌場も減っている。

トキの生態を長年研究している新潟大学の永田尚志名誉教授は「昨年は、密度効果によって繁殖成績、生存率も落ちていた。推定生息方法を見直して実際の数字に近づいた」としている。そのうえで、今の佐渡の環境下では、500羽前後が最適数ではないかという。

自然は微妙なバランスの上になりたっている。これまでは生息数を増やすことを目的に放鳥計画が作られてきたが、これからは環境にあった放鳥計画へと方針転換の時期にきている。

５月には、石川・能登で本州初の放鳥が計画されている。放鳥の舞台はこれから本州へと移ることになる。

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