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Issue

The Red Brick Bulletin

Feature: Winter Activities in Hokkaido

JET Spotlight: Sohyun Kim



www.pref.hokkaido.lg.jp

Maxwell Stibbard Hawkes works at the International Affairs Division of the Hokkaido Government. In this issue, he introduces various lesser-known winter activities that can be enjoyed across the island.

In the Still of Winter



▲ The snowy fields of Biei

Winter is undoubtedly the season that Hokkaido is best known for, and perhaps needs little introduction. The powder snow that blankets the island during this period attracts skiers and snowboarders from around the globe, and has achieved such legendary status in these communities that it is known by its own name: 'JaPOW'. This hallowed substance also takes centre stage at one of Hokkaido's biggest events, the Sapporo Snow Festival, where it is shaped into enormous sculptures for onlookers to admire. Whether sliding down the snowy mountains of Niseko or staring up at the mountainous snow-sculptures of Sapporo, Hokkaido delivers winter thrills on a scale that few other places can match, making it a prime destination for those seeking stimulation and sheer spectacle during the colder months.

There is, however, a quieter side to the island during this season – one often overshadowed by the bigger events. With COVID-19 affecting many large-scale festivities over the last few years, some have sought out smaller-scale, more solitary activities to keep themselves entertained over the winter period. In this issue, I would like to showcase some of the tranquil charms that Hokkaido holds. Read on to learn more!

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Jewellery Ice

In the depths of winter, many rivers and lakes across Hokkaido freeze over, redefining the landscape. When this ice eventually thaws and fractures, it is carried downstream to meet the writhing seas, where it is tossed about mercilessly and then cast ashore. The resulting fragments, polished like glass by the ocean waves, have been christened 'jewellery ice' for the way they sparkle like diamonds in the sun. In recent years, these glittering crystals have become a popular subject for photographers, who flood to Hokkaido's shores in winter seeking to capture the dance of light that plays out inside the icy prisms.



▲ Jewellery ice in Shiranuka

Much like snowflakes, no two pieces of jewellery ice are the same. Look closely enough, and each tells a different story about its origin. Some are perfectly clear; others layered and opaque. Some are polished smooth by the waves; others left rough and craggy. Some are filled with hundreds of air pockets and look for all the world like giant blocks of glassy Swiss cheese. Others are as dense and solid as billiard balls.

Despite this incredible diversity of shapes and structures, all end up meeting much the same fate; melting back into the oceans to become part of the current that once shaped them. Diamonds may be forever, but jewellery ice is by nature highly transient – though no less beautiful for it. Much like the autumn leaves or spring blossoms that lie on either side, the beauty of these winter crystals is only enhanced by their impermanence.

As the season progresses, new ice is washed ashore and old ice melts into fascinating new forms. Even over a single day, light and weather conditions can change drastically, filling the crystals with a kaleidoscope of colours in the process. This constant evolution is a huge part of the ice's appeal and ensures that every trip to admire the ice is a wholly unique experience.



▲ Scattered across the shoreline

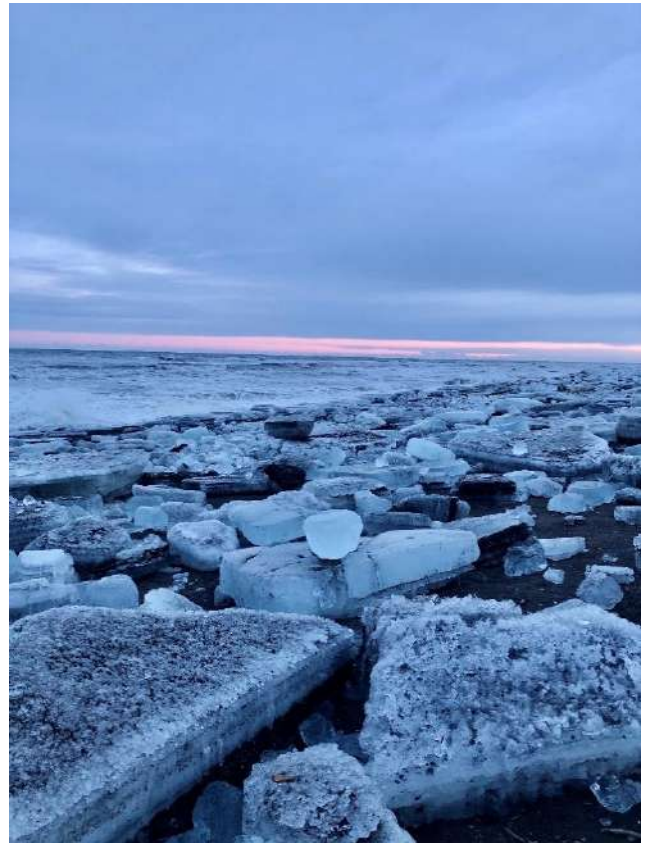
The changeable, highly weather-dependent nature of the ice makes it difficult to pinpoint exactly when and where it will appear, but some spots are known to have especially high odds. The conditions are particularly favourable around the mouth of the Tokachi River on the Otsu Coast, which usually receives its shipment of frozen crystals between January and February, and can be accessed from the town of Toyokoro. If need something to light up your heart in the depths of winter, a beachful of glittering jewellery might be just the thing.

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▲ A shard of ice in the water's line of fire



▲ As cold as it looks



▲ A technicolour sunset lights up the frozen world below

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Birdwatching

Birdwatching is a hobby with some impressively passionate practitioners. Devotees such as Stuart Keith and Kenn Kaufman have become legends in birding circles for their continent-spanning trips documenting thousands of species, and some have even perished in the pursuit of plumage (birder David Hunt was tragically killed by a tiger in 1985 while leading a tour in India).



▲ Stellar's sea eagles (Taken by Phoenix Scotney, CIR in Sapporo)
However, birdwatching is not inherently a high-stakes hobby, nor the sole preserve of enthusiasts or well-heeled retirees. There's no need to carry expensive optical equipment or extensive avian encyclopaedias to enjoy observing our fine feathered friends – especially if the birds in question are big and easily identifiable. Hokkaido happens to be home to some particularly large and iconic species, which makes it a prime destination for experienced birders and beginners alike.

Chief among these iconic species is the red-crowned (*tanchō*/丹頂) crane, whose impressive size, distinctive scarlet crest, and inimitable 'honk' make it especially easy to identify. This crane has achieved near-mythical status in Japanese (and wider East Asian) folklore, appearing on everything from banknotes to hanging scrolls; woodblock prints to airline logos; beer bottles to ceremonial kimonos.

At approximately 1.5m in stature (with a wingspan over 2m), you don't have to get too close to see why these birds have become synonymous with elegance and refinement: their slender bodies a stark contrast of snow-white and pitch-black plumage, punctuated only by the red crown from which they take their name. Against the striking two-tone colourway, this crimson insignia stands out like the red seal (*rakkan'in*/落款印) stamped on a *sumi-e* (墨絵) ink painting. This, in combination with the crane's graceful movements, gives the impression that one is witnessing a piece of living brushwork.



▲ Red-crowned cranes (Phoenix Scotney)

A century ago, it would have been difficult to recommend a trip to Hokkaido (or anywhere in Japan) to see the cranes, as numbers had dwindled to only a few dozen nationwide. However, successful conservation programmes carried out in the wider Kushiro area have seen the species bounce back from

the brink of extinction, and there are now estimated to be over 1,800 birds resident to the island (in addition to migratory populations spread across mainland Asia).



▲ White-tailed Eagle (Phoenix Scotney)

One village integral to this revival is the aptly named *Tsurui-mura* (鶴居村), which can be translated into English as ‘village where the cranes are’. Having visited several times before, I can confirm that there are indeed cranes, and they really are quite impressive. In particular, the ‘Tsurui-Ito Tancho Sanctuary’ is a prime spot to see them go about their business.

Over the winter, the birds flock here *en masse* to feed, dance, and above all: honk. This raucous squawk is perhaps at odds with the crane’s otherwise refined, cultivated demeanour, but is at least distinctive. You can generally hear the cranes well before you can see them, and the ear-splitting intensity ensures you’ll be wide awake by the time they come into view.

Other spots in eastern Hokkaido where bigger birds can be seen include the lakes of Kussharo and Tofutsu (popular with whooper swans) and of course, the Shiretoko Peninsula – a UNESCO World Heritage Site home to raptors such as the Steller’s sea eagle, white-tailed eagle, and Blakiston’s fish owl.

Of course, this region of Hokkaido is home to a whole host of smaller birds just as worthy of attention as the larger specimens mentioned above, but I’ll save that for another time. Suffice to say, for avian admirers, a trip out east is sure to be an absolute hoot.



▲ Cranes and swans on the surface of the frozen surface of Lake Toro

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▲ Candid swan shot (taken by Michael Arthur, ALT in Teshikaga)



▲ Swan mid-flight (Michael Arthur)

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▲ Stellar's sea eagle (Phoenix Scotney)



▲ White-tailed eagle (taken by Ace Zi Yu Peng, ALT in Yubetsu)



▲ Black kite in flight (taken by May Joie Alcaraz, ALT in Sapporo)

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Winter Hiking

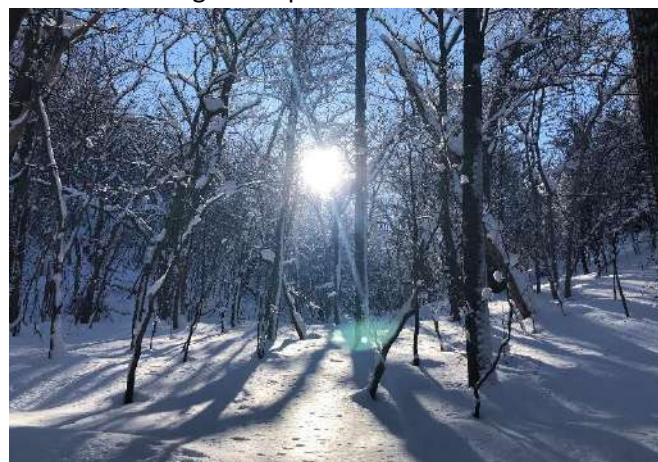
Venturing into the mountains in the midst of Hokkaido's frigid winter may seem like a foolish undertaking, and it's true that some of the gnarlier trails are best left to seasoned mountaineers and wild animals. However, for those content to take the path *more* travelled, Hokkaido offers plenty of winter hiking routes that are safe, accessible, and suitable for all ages and skill levels. Several of these routes lie on the outskirts of Sapporo City, and this proximity to civilisation ensures that the snow is well-trodden, internet coverage ample, and help close at hand in case of emergency.



▲ Every proper hike starts with a proper hiking pose

One popular Sapporo hike is up to the summit of Mt. Moiwa, which boasts panoramic views over the city and was declared one of 'Japan's New Three Most Spectacular Night Views' in 2015. The lattice of city-lights twinkling under the starry sky certainly makes for a rather romantic spectacle, and the daytime views are nothing to be sniffed at either (though you'd be forgiven for having a runny nose after scrambling up the snowy mountain.)

On a clear day, you can see beyond the city – beyond even the expansive Sorachi plains – and out to the Hidaka mountains that make up Hokkaido's spine. If the night views from Mt. Moiwa frame Sapporo as Hokkaido's glittering centrepiece, then the day views are a reminder of the city's minuteness in the face of the Hokkaido's great expanse.



▲ Sunlight filtering through the trees

These views can be easily accessed at any time of day by ropeway/cable car/aerial tram, so the need for hiking can technically be avoided entirely. Before taking to the trails, I'd already made the trip to the summit via the ropeway several times, and the views alone made it a very memorable experience. However, the first mouthful of mountaintop *mochi* definitely tasted sweeter for having hiked up.



▲ Nearing the summit of Mt. Moiwa

The flexibility of this setup makes it possible for hikers and non-hikers alike to gather at the summit, or mix and match according to one's schedule. Those wishing to climb the mountain in the light *and* admire the night views can hike up during the day, warm up with a coffee at the mountaintop café, and then watch as the sun sets over the city. After taking in the glittering vista, returning to the city is a simple matter of catching the next cable car down – certainly a less daunting task than descending a snowy mountain in the dark.



▲ The view of the surrounding mountains from Mt. Moiwa

For those who choose to hike to the summit, a pair of crampons is advised, as the heavily compacted snow can prove difficult to gain purchase on otherwise. I made the hike twice between January and March: once with a pair of cheap (sub-¥2000) rubber crampons, and once without. The difference was profound. The 'with-crampon' attempt was a relatively straightforward walk through the woods with a few hundred metres of ascent. The crampon-less attempt, however, was a spectacle best described as watching an octopus learn to roller-skate in a bouncy castle; a graceless mass of flailing limbs with little sense of prevailing direction. By the time I reached the top, I felt like I'd climbed up twice.

Of course, you don't need to scale a mountain to enjoy a bracing winter walk under Hokkaido's expansive skies. Many flatter routes exist, and anyone with appropriate

footwear and warm clothing can continue to enjoy the great outdoors even after the mercury plummets. Many of the island's charms only reveal themselves in this season, and it's arguably even more important to proactively get outdoors during the shorter days to squeeze out every drop of sunlight available.

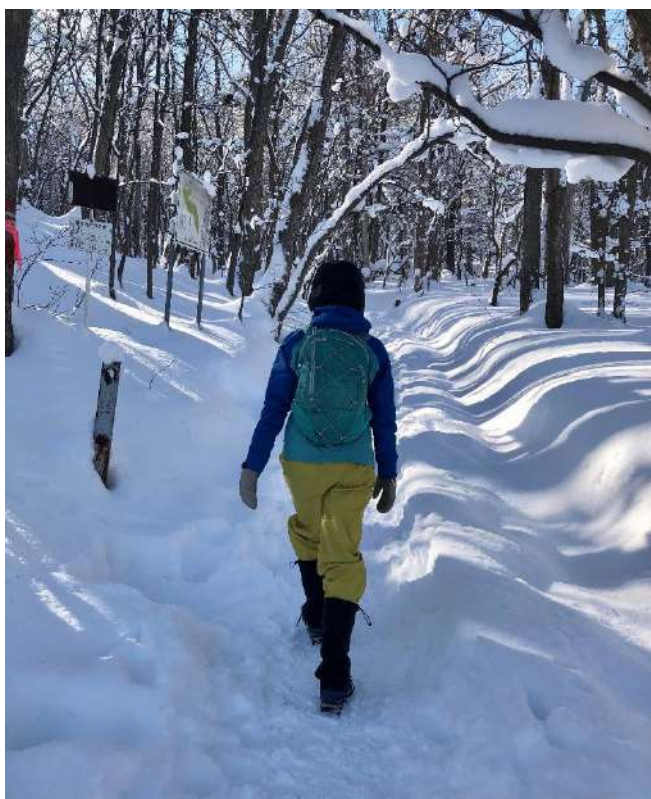


▲ Leaving the city behind

Whether it be skiing, snowboarding, snowshoeing, fat-biking, sledging, banana-boating, ice-skating, or just a gentle stroll through the woods, Hokkaido offers a whole host of ways to get out and enjoy its most famous season. There's a reason why the prefecture's snow is considered some of the best in the world, and it really must be experienced to be believed. There's nothing quite like the soft embrace of sweet JaPOW.



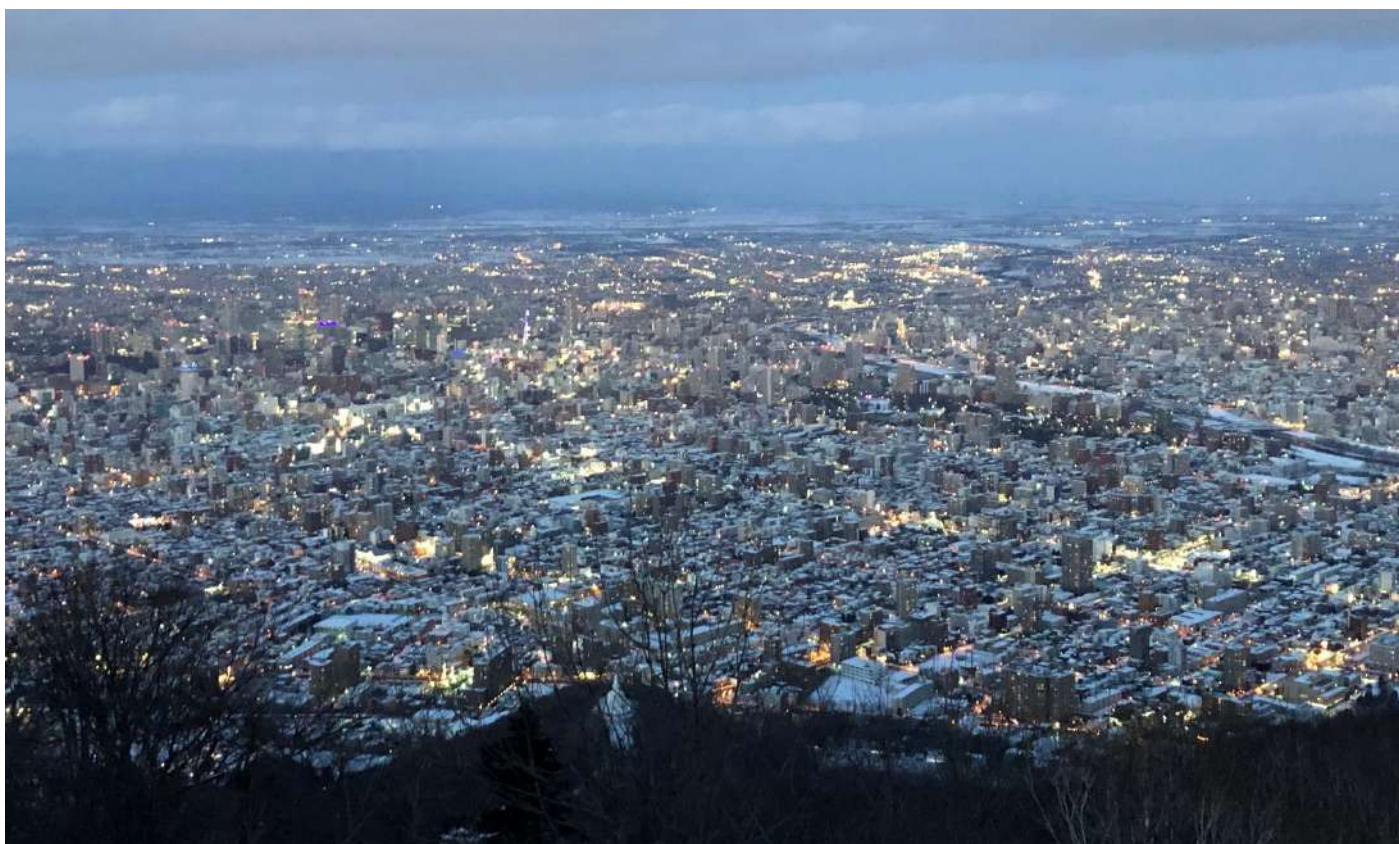
▲ My father reveling in the thick, fluffy JaPOW



▲ The hike begins



▲ Icy pops



▲ The city at dusk

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The Snowfolk of Hokkaido



▲ Snōsuke the First



▲ Big Barry (and regular-sized Sohyun)



▲ Snowy Allen (and Kyun-chan)



▲ Powdergeist



HOKKAIDO JET SPOTLIGHT



There are about 300 participants of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme who call Hokkaido home. We come from all over the world and we all have a very unique experience with the island. Each has their own story to tell – let's get to know them!



MEET SOHYUN KIM

In this issue, we introduce Sohyun Kim, translator, bassist, and world-travelling Kyun-chan fan. She is a fourth-year CIR working at the Hokkaido Government Offices in Sapporo.



▲ In front of the glittering Lake Shikotsu

Tell us a bit about yourself!

Hello! My name is Sohyun Kim and I work at the International Affairs Division of the Hokkaido Government. I was born in the capital of South Korea, Seoul. I'm now in my fourth year as a CIR, though it feels like only yesterday that I started! My favourite activities are travelling, exercising, taking photos, listening to music, and drinking coffee.

What brought you to Hokkaido/Japan?

When I lived in South Korea, I worked as a freelance Japanese translator and interpreter. As a freelancer, I was constantly moving between companies, meeting new people, and working on a variety of projects. However, I wanted to work in an environment where I could focus on one thing for an extended period of time, so I began looking for a new job. One day, I stumbled across an advertisement for the JET Programme and thought it would be a good opportunity to utilise my previous experience, so applied for the position.

I'd previously visited Japan over 20 times for travel and business, but had never been to Hokkaido before. Sometimes I think that it was fate that I was placed here. Hokkaido has friendly relations with Seoul (where I was born and raised) and Sapporo is a sister-city of Munich, Germany (where I used to live). I was worried at first because I'd heard that Hokkaido's winters are very long and cold, but I find myself surrounded by warm-hearted people who keep the cold at bay like a *kairo*. Thanks to them I'm very happy here.

How has your experience been so far?

Over these last three years as a CIR, I've visited various places around Hokkaido for work and participated in many events where I've met a whole host of people. These experiences have allowed me to learn and feel many new things, expanding my world in the process. I've also had plenty of opportunities to photograph and write about my experiences for my job. I've enjoyed being able to turn what I love into my occupation. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who's kindly supported me so I can experience all these things.

Something I've noticed since coming to Hokkaido is just how lovely the summer is. (In South Korea, summer brings the rainy season which is hot and sticky.) Even as the days go by in a similar fashion, I've come to notice the beauty and diversity hiding all around us. Whether it be watching the flowers bloom by the roadside or admiring the snowmen as they change shape from day to day, it's the small, quotidian moments that stick in the mind, but I'm sure I wouldn't be able to experience them if I'd stayed in Seoul.

What has been your most memorable moment?

It has to be the work trip covering Wakkanai, Rebun and Rishiri. On the drive there, I remember just gazing out at the enormous plains stretching into the distance and letting the music from the car's speakers wash over me. During the trip we tried out various hands-on activities such as touching live sea urchins, processing kombu, and feeding seals, and got to really experience nature up close. We also sampled fresh seafood and local delicacies for a true taste of the region. I also remember lying outside on the ground at night and chatting as we waited for the clouds to clear, revealing the starry sky above. In the end, the clouds went nowhere and we left without seeing a single star, but even so, it's a fond memory looking back at it now.

Dear reader, can you see the stars where you live? I'd love to travel around and see the night skies all over the world!

What is your favourite thing about your region?

Sapporo is undoubtedly the busiest part of the island, but it has plenty of places where you can connect with nature. Green spaces such as Mt. Moiwa, Moerenuma Park, and Hitsujigaoka are right on your doorstep, and it's easy to relax and unwind on the weekend without even having to leave the city. (※Please be careful when heading out so as not to have a surprise encounter with the local bear population! 🐻 🌬️)



▲ Hitsujigaoka Observation Hill

Also, at just a short car-trip from the Sapporo, you can experience the squawking seagulls soaring above the seashore in Zenibako, the majestic Lake Shikotsu where the fish swim freely, and many similar locations. For me, these aquatic delights are a large part of the region's charm.

