

The Japan Times

Established 1897

Incorporating The Japan Advertiser 1890-1940
The Japan Chronicle 1868-1940
The Japan Mail 1870-1918
The Japan Times 1865-1870

Owned and published daily by
The Japan Times, Ltd.

TOSHIKI OGASAWARA, *Chairman and Publisher*
JUNICHIRO SUZUKI, *Editor-in-Chief*
MINORU SHIMIZU, *General Manager*
YOSHIHISA OHTA, *Executive Manager*
SHIGEO SHIMADA, *Managing Editor*

EDITORIAL

Japan must respect animal rights

Analysts of the Japanese attitude to animals, professional and amateur alike, have been having a field day in the last few weeks. They have had plenty to work with. On the one hand, owners shamelessly pamper their pets — recession or no, commercials advertising gourmet pet food flood our television screens. On the other, a rash of wantonly cruel acts to defenseless creatures has captured public attention.

Specialists say the extremer aspects of the pet boom reflect the emptiness of many lives today. That could also help to explain the growing number of adults purchasing expensive stuffed animal toys. The experts then blame the cruelty on causes ranging from the “demented” state of society to the prevalence of a faulty home environment among self-centered modern families. There is doubtless some truth to all of this, but instant analysis cannot explain why the sadistic incidents seem to be multiplying so rapidly.

Foreign observers have long accused this country of turning a blind eye to its cruelty to animals. It is true that many pets here are kept confined in small spaces and that too many are simply abandoned when their cuteness wears off or their owners must move. What is shocking about so many of the latest acts is their willfulness. They seem to reflect blind rage, but against what? The demands of this conformist society? The recession? Or the inner demons of the perpetrators?

A sigh of relief went up across the nation a little over a week ago when the plight of the pintail duck with a 30-cm aluminum arrow thrust through its body was happily resolved. Attention had focused on the plucky female for several weeks, since she had first been spotted on the Shakujii River in Tokyo's Kita Ward. Some observers say she provided a welcome respite from the political and financial scandals dominating the news.

We hope she may have been a bit more. After a week of frustrating failures, specialists from Tokyo's Ueno Zoo finally captured the duck, removed the arrow and found it had miraculously missed any vital organs, thus causing no serious injury. That may not have been the outcome intended by whatever misguided individual shot the arrow in the

first place. A university psychologist says the shooting was not the work of a hunter but of someone who wanted to deliberately injure the bird.

How many of those so happy to learn that she is now recovering know that three other ducks have died after being shot by just such arrows at the same location on the river? Do they know that zoo experts also found two shotgun pellets in the rescued bird, suggesting she had been targeted by a hunter, too? This duck was very, very lucky.

The same cannot be said for some of the other recent victims. The number of migrating swans wintering on Japanese lakes has been increasing, and so have the injuries they experience. One of the most common is when they — along with many other birds — become entangled in hooks and lines or nets discarded by careless fishermen. Other cases are more suspicious. Three swans in Yamagata Prefecture, for instance, have been discovered to have plastic sticks nearly 10 cm long piercing their necks.

Ueno Zoo Director Mitsuko Masui questions the hullabaloo about the recent cases, which she says are “only the tip of the iceberg.” She adds disturbingly — and doubtless rightly — that there are many other examples of animals suffering out of the public eye. Ms. Masui made her statement just before a truly horrifying incident that was very much in the public eye.

A little over one week ago an elderly Tokyo woman's beloved pets, three dogs — a female and two of her puppies — and two cats, were spirited away in the baby buggy in which they waited while she shopped in a ground-floor supermarket. They were taken to the seventh floor of the eight-story building and tossed off, buggy and all. The mother dog and one puppy died. The other puppy suffered a broken hip. Happily, both cats survived. It should come as no surprise that the owner told reporters she could never forgive the person who would commit such a heinous crime.

We need to ask whether all the attention being paid to the recent shocking incidents will simply fade away as soon as some other hot topic captures media and public attention. Or will what some have called a “media frenzy” help lead to a new and lasting awareness that defenseless creatures too have rights that need protecting? We believe the answer is the latter, even if it is only a beginning.