After the dead vegetation is burned off, reeds burst from the 1,500 ha land. This short-eared owl is yet to depart to the north.

In late summer over 100,000 swallows congregate here en-route to their winter habitats. Swallows returning to their roosts at dusk.
After the dead vegetation is burned off, reeds burst from the 1,500ha land. This short-eared owl is yet to depart to the north.

Watarase Retarding Basin became a Ramsar site.

Let us realize the “Wise Use” concept to achieve a balance between flood control and conservation/restoration of the wetland.

Ramsar Convention and Ramsar Sites in Japan

The Ramsar Convention is an intergovernmental treaty for the conservation of wetlands adopted in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971. The Convention’s mission is to promote the conservation and wise use (or sustainable use) of all wetlands (where there is water such as seashores, lakes, rivers and rice paddies) that are indispensable for all living things on earth and healthy living of humankind.

Each contracting party is obliged to designate at least one wetland site for inclusion in the List of Wetlands of International Importance, or “Ramsar List.” Japan acceded to the Convention in 1980 by designating Kushiro Marshland as its first Ramsar site. Since then Japan has designated more wetlands, and at Ramsar COP11 held in Bucharest, Rumania in July 2012, added nine wetlands, including the 2,861 ha area of Watarase Retarding Basin to the Ramsar List making the total number and area of Ramsar sites in Japan 46 and 137,968 ha respectively.

The International Importance of Watarase Retarding Basin

Watarase Retarding Basin extends over four cities and two towns in Tochigi, Ibaraki, Gunma and Saitama prefectures. It is a low moor with the largest reed marsh in Japan outside Hokkaido and a treasure house of endangered plant species, including *Ophioglossum namegatae*. In late summer more than 100,000 swallows congregate here en-route to their winter habitats. It is one of the largest winter habitats in Japan for falconiformes, including the Eastern marsh harrier. There were calls for this wetland to be conserved as a Ramsar site.

The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, which is responsible for the management and flood control of Watarase Retarding Basin as a “River Area” as specified by the River Law, drew up the Basic Plan for the Conservation and Restoration of Watarase Retarding Basin. The plan includes the excavation of retention reservoirs to improve its flood control capacity and restore the water surfaces of the retarding basin which have started to dry up.

As a result of inter-agency consultations on the Ramsar site designation of the retarding basin, the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism decided to maintain the land-use restriction in the River Area, and in addition, designate the retarding basin as an Ordinary Zone of the National Wildlife Protection Area, in which hunting of all wildlife species is prohibited from June 2012. With these protective measures in place the retarding basin was designated as a Ramsar site.

Wise use of wetland by balancing flood control and conservation/restoration

Flood control was an earnest wish of the local residents who had sustained flood damage from time to time. In February 2012, conservation groups advocating Ramsar site designation and a local flood control organization signed a written pledge to the effect that, taking the opportunity of Ramsar site designation of Watarase Retarding Basin, they would work together to achieve a balance between flood control and conservation/restoration of the wetland.

The wise use of wetlands, the ideal of the Ramsar Convention, will become a reality in this newly designated Ramsar site through cooperation among many partners, including the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, which is in charge of the management of the retarding basin, the Ministry of the Environment, which designated the area as a National Wildlife Protection Area, the governments of four prefectures, four cities and two towns, nature conservation groups, flood control organizations and many groups and individuals who love and use the retarding basin.
About a century ago Yanaka Village and Akama Marsh existed here

Watarase Retarding Basin is located where there was a marshland with many large marshes, including Akama Marsh, and farmlands and villages. In 1888 three villages amalgamated to form Yanaka Village. About 2,500 villagers in 370 households made their living by farming, fishing and sedge-hat making. In the late 1870s polluted discharge from Ashio Copper Mine in the uppermost reaches of Watarase River started to cause serious damage to agriculture, fisheries and the lives of people in the river basin. This case, known as the Ashio Copper Mine Pollution Case developed into a significant social problem of the time and shook the entire nation.

Mr. Shozo Tanaka, a member of the House of Representatives, began a protest movement with affected residents to demand the closure of the copper mine. Instead of closing the mine, the government of the time decided to install a flood control basin that would submerge Yanaka Village, using flood prevention as an excuse. The government removed the villagers by destroying their houses and wiped the village off the map in 1907. Additionally, the channel of Watarase River, which flowed through the border between Tochigi and Gunma prefectures was diverted eastward in 1910s. This diversion led to the disappearance of Akama Marsh due to increased sediment transportation. Places where there were rice paddies, crop fields and houses all turned into an expanse of reed marsh.

Making a shift away from development and towards the conservation of village ruins and nature

This, the largest reed marsh in Honshu Island with such historical background became an important habitat for wetland flora and fauna. However this area was not free from development projects. In 1989 Watarase Reservoir (Yanaka Lake), a flatland dam, was constructed to supply water to the Tokyo metropolitan area. The shape of the lake is proof of a strong protest against the project. Former villagers and their descendants formed a group “For the Protection of Yanaka Village Ruins” and staged a sit-in to protect the sites of Shinto shrines and village office. As a result the government modified the plan and the lake has an irregular heart-shape.

Even after the completion of Yanaka Lake, development projects emerged one after another putting the ecosystem of the retarding basin at greater risk of destruction. In 1990 the Council of the Inhabitants of the Tone River Area for the Protection of Watarase Marsh was formed. Activities of the Council helped defeat destructive development projects. Since the turn of the century many different conservation activities have been unfolding. People who love and use the retarding basin started taking initiatives and a federation of groups in support of Ramsar site designation was formed. A new page was added to the history of Watarase Retarding Basin when it was recognized as a Wetland of International Importance in July 2012.

Sustaining the history and ecosystem of Watarase Retarding Basin for future generation

Watarase Retarding Basin came into being more than a century ago. We hope to ensure that the conservation of this wetland as a Ramsar site will bring many benefits, such as helping us to share the blessings of nature with other living things and pass on those and other blessings to future generations while learning about the history of this vast wetland in the middle of the Kanto Plain. Let us mobilize our wisdom and power to practice the conservation and wise use of Watarase Retarding Basin!
Abundant nature supporting many life forms

**Plants**

1,000 species (60 of them endangered)

After the spring burn-off the marsh is densely covered with plants rarely found elsewhere, including *Ophioglossum namegatae* and *Galium tokyoense*. Communities of *Euphorbia adenochlora* appear yellow. *Artemisia feddei* gives off a rich aroma.

- **Amsonia elliptica** (endangered)  
  [Photo: Joji Nomoto]

- **Ophioglossum namegatae** (endangered)  
  [Photo: Yosuke Horiuchi]

- **Euphorbia adenochlora** (endangered)

**Insects**

Approx. 1,700 species (23 of them endangered)

The retarding basin is a treasure house of insects and *Chrysolina virgata*, *Phyllobius japonicus* and other rare wetland insect species are commonly found. It is abundant with endemic insect species, including *Anthicus watarasensis*.

- **Chrysolina virgata** (classified as “Near Threatened” by Tochigi Prefecture)  
  [Photo: Hideo Ohkawa]

- **Hippodamia tredecimpunctata** (classified as “Noteworthy” by Tochigi Prefecture)
252 species (44 of them endangered)

Reed warblers stage a huge chorus in early summer. The retarding basin becomes a stopover for shorebirds during their spring and autumn migrations. It supports 25 species of falconiformes and strigiformes, which are at the top of the food chain. The species richness of raptors is one of the highest in Japan.
Wetlands provide great benefits to humans and their livelihoods

People learn about the history of Yanaka Village at the site of the Enmeiin Buddhist Temple and enjoy outdoor workshops, walking, bicycling, wind surfing, hot-air balloon ride, etc. The vast retarding basin attracts many people and nurtures diverse life forms.

Dead vegetation is burned off to promote the new growth of rare plant species and maintain the quality of the reed marsh. photo: Yosuke Horiuchi

Enmeiin Buddhist Temple
photo: Yosuke Horiuchi

Reed harvesting. May the valuable local industry thrive. photo: Yosuke Horiuchi

Participants intently observing waterside insects.

Dead vegetation is burned off to promote the new growth of rare plant species and maintain the quality of the reed marsh. photo: Yosuke Horiuchi

Fisherman using traditional fishing gears such as casting nets and zanburi (net fitted into a cone-shaped bamboo frame). Abundant water nurtures 44 fish species, including the common carp, crucian carp, Japanese smelt and willow gudgeon. They become ingredients of local specialties such as fish kanroni (fish stewed in soy sauce and sugar). photo: Yosuke Horiuchi
An Eastern marsh harrier skims the golden rods of reeds swaying in the autumn breeze. More than 40 of them roost in the reed beds.

Publisher:
Association to Designate Watarase Retarding Basin as Ramsar Site
Masatomi Asano Law Firm, 1-6-19 Hitotonoya, Oyama-shi, Tochigi-ken, 323-0034 Japan
Tel: 0285-25-6577   Website: http://watarase.jimdo.com/

The Council of the Inhabitants of the Tone River Area for the Protection of Watarase Marsh / Watarase Mirai (Future) Project / Tochigi Branch of Wild Bird Society of Japan / Gunma Branch of Wild Bird Society of Japan / Association of Citizens to Consider Environment of Oyama City / The Nature Conservation Society of Fujioka, Tochigi

Sponsors:
Tochigi Chamber of Commerce and Industry / Oyama Chamber of Commerce and Industry / Fujisawa Society of Commerce and Industry / Ibaraki Pref. / Koga City / Gunma Pref. / Itakura Town / Saitama Pref. / Kazo City

Guide Map of Watarase Retarding Basin
Area of retarding basin: 3,300ha

Tochigi Pref.  Tochigi City
Oyama City
Nogi Town
Ibaraki Pref.  Koga City
Gunma Pref.  Itakura Town
Saitama Pref.  Kazo City

The Council of the Inhabitants of the Tone River Area for the Protection of Watarase Marsh / Watarase Mirai (Future) Project / Tochigi Branch of Wild Bird Society of Japan / Gunma Branch of Wild Bird Society of Japan / Association of Citizens to Consider Environment of Oyama City / The Nature Conservation Society of Fujioka, Tochigi

Sponsors:
Tochigi Chamber of Commerce and Industry / Oyama Chamber of Commerce and Industry / Fujisawa Society of Commerce and Industry / Ibaraki Pref. / Koga City / Gunma Pref. / Itakura Town / Saitama Pref. / Kazo City

Guide Map of Watarase Retarding Basin
Area of retarding basin: 3,300ha

Tochigi Pref.  Tochigi City
Oyama City
Nogi Town
Ibaraki Pref.  Koga City
Gunma Pref.  Itakura Town
Saitama Pref.  Kazo City
An Eastern marsh harrier skims the golden rods of reeds swaying in the autumn breeze. More than 40 of them roost in the reed beds.

Japan’s New Ramsar Site
渡良瀬遊水地
Watarase Retarding Basin

This is one of the major staging sites of falconiformes in Japan. On clear winter days, Mt. Fuji becomes visible even though it is 130 km away.