

Japanese railway turns to feline 'stationmaster' for help



by Toru Yamanaka

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In times of need, Japanese say they can even ask the cat for help. In this town in western Japan, people look to Tama, a nine-year-old cat working as master of an unmanned train station.

The tortoiseshell coloured creature, born and raised at Kishi Station on the provincial Kishigawa Line, wears a formal uniform cap of Wakayama Electric Railway and calmly watches passing passengers who greet her.

There are 10 train stations on the 14.3-kilometre (8.9-mile) line.

"Tama is the only stationmaster as we have to reduce personnel costs. You say you could ask for the cat's help, but she is actually bringing luck to us," Wakayama Electric spokeswoman Keiko Yamaki said.

The company feeds her in lieu of salary.

Tama was born from a stray cat brought to the station by a cleaner and kept by Toshiko Koyama, a local who runs a grocery store next door.

The station went unmanned in April 2006 as the line was losing money. But Tama stuck around.

She rose to national stardom in January 2007 as the railway company formally appointed her as "stationmaster".

Her appointment had an immediately positive effect, boosting the number of passengers using the line in January by 17 percent from a year earlier.

For the year to March 2007, the number of passengers rose to 2.1 million, up 10 percent from the previous 12 months, according to Yamaki.

Happy with her successful job as stationmaster, the company promoted Tama to "super-stationmaster" in January this year, making her "the only female in a managerial position" in the company's 36-strong workforce.

"She now holds the fifth highest position in the company," Yamaki joked.

In reward for the promotion, Tama got a new "office".

The stationmaster's office, a renovated former ticket booth at the station, opened in April with the attendance of Kinokawa Mayor Shinji Nakamura and Wakayama Electric president Mitsunobu Kojima.

The office guarantees her some privacy.

"She declines to relieve herself when passengers are looking. We set the toilet where passengers can't see," Yamaki said.

Those who want to greet her must be careful so as not to miss her.

"She works nine to five and takes Sundays off," Yamaki said.

Tama commutes with Koyama, the grocery store operator, from a shed next to the station. As Koyama tells her, "Ms Stationmaster, it's time to work," Tama comes along to the station, Yamaki said.

The stationmaster is set to appear in a French documentary film, being directed by Myriam Tonelotto, about wonder cats from around the world.

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