

JP

JAPANESE LESSON

Counting Animals



Counting Animals — どうぶつをかぞえる

Japanese uses special counting words called じょうすうし (助数詞) — counters depending on what you are counting. Animals have three main counters based on their size. This lesson covers all three, plus the tricky irregular readings for 〜ひき.

The Three Animal Counters

〜ひき (〜匹) — MOST
COMMON

〜ひき / びき / ぴ
き

~hiki / biki / piki

Small to medium animals —
cats, dogs, fish, insects, rabbits
(sometimes)

ねこが**さん**びきいます。
There are three cats.

〜とう (〜頭)

〜とう

~tou

Large animals — horses, cows,
elephants, whales, bears

ぞうが**に**とういます。
There are two elephants.

〜わ (〜羽)

〜わ / ば / ぱ

~wa / ba / pa

Birds and rabbits (rabbits are
counted with 羽 in traditional
Japanese!)

とりが**ご**わいます。
There are five birds.

1
2
3
4

Counting 1–10 with Each Counter

Red = irregular reading — these must be memorised. 〜ひき has the most irregulars, so pay extra attention!

〜ひき (匹) — small animals

- | | |
|---|---------------|
| 1 | い っ ぴき |
| 2 | にひき |
| 3 | さ ん びき |
| 4 | よんひき |
| 5 | ごひき |

〜とう (頭) — large animals

- | | |
|---|---------------|
| 1 | い っ とう |
| 2 | にとう |
| 3 | さ ん とう |
| 4 | よんとう |
| 5 | ごとう |

〜わ (羽) — birds & rabbits

- | | |
|---|-----------------------------|
| 1 | い ち わ |
| 2 | にわ |
| 3 | さ ん わ / さ ん ば |
| 4 | よんわ |
| 5 | ごわ |

6	ろっぴき	6	ろくとう	6	ろくわ
7	ななひき	7	ななとう	7	ななわ
8	はっぴき	8	はっとう	8	はちわ / はっぱ
9	きゅうひき	9	きゅうとう	9	きゅうわ
10	じゅっぴき	10	じゅっとう	10	じゅっぱ
?	なんびき？	?	なんとう？	?	なんわ？

🗨 Dialogues — かいわ

Six short conversations using animal counters in natural, everyday situations.

① At the Pet Shop — ペットショップで

A:

すみません、ねこはなんびきいますか？

Sumimasen, neko wa nanbiki imasu ka?

Excuse me, how many cats are there?

B:

いま、さんびきいます。

Ima, sanbiki imasu.

There are three at the moment.

A:

かわいいですね！

Kawaii desu ne!

They're so cute!

② At the Zoo — どうぶつえんで

A:

あのぞうはなんとういますか？

Ano zou wa nantou imasu ka?

How many elephants are there over there?

B:

にとういます。おやとこどもです。

Nitou imasu. Oya to kodomo desu.

There are two. A parent and a child.

A:

おおきいですね！

Ookii desu ne!

They're huge!

③ Fish Tank — すいそう

A:

すいそうにきんぎょがなんびきいますか？

Suisou ni kingyo ga nanbiki imasu ka?

④ Your Pets — あなたのペット

A:

ペットを飼っていますか？

Petto wo katte imasu ka?

Do you have any pets?

How many goldfish are in the tank?

B:

ろっぴきいます。いろいろないろ
ですよ。

Roppiki imasu. Iroiro na iro desu yo.
There are six. All different colours!

A:

きれいですね！

Kirei desu ne!
How beautiful!

B:

はい。ねこをにひきとうさぎをい
ちわかっています。

*Hai. Neko wo nihiki to usagi wo ichiwa katte
imasu.*

Yes. I keep two cats and one rabbit.

A:

いいですね！なまえはありますか？

Ii desu ne! Namae wa arimasu ka?
How lovely! Do they have names?

⑤ Birds in the Park — こうえんのとおり

A:

あのきにとりがなんわいますか？

Ano ki ni tori ga nanwa imasu ka?
How many birds are in that tree?

B:

かぞえてみます...ごわです！

Kazoete mimasu... gowa desu!
Let me count... five!

A:

きれいなこえですね。

Kirei na koe desu ne.
They have such beautiful calls, don't they.

⑥ On the Farm — のうじょうで

A:

こののうじょうにうしはなんとう
いますか？

Kono noujou ni ushi wa nantou imasu ka?
How many cows are on this farm?

B:

じゅっとういます。まいにちちち
をとります。

Juttou imasu. Mainichi chichi wo torimasu.
There are ten. We take milk from them every
day.

A:

おいですね！

Ooi desu ne!
That's a lot!

Vocabulary — ごい

20 key words for this topic — animals, counters, and the verbs you need to talk about them.

#	JAPANESE	ROMAJI	ENGLISH	TYPE	NOTE
1	ねこ (猫)	neko	cat	noun	counted with 〜ひき
2	いぬ (犬)	inu	dog	noun	counted with 〜ひき
3	とり (鳥)	tori	bird	noun	counted with 〜わ
4	さかな (魚)	sakana	fish	noun	counted with 〜ひき
5	うさぎ (兎)	usagi	rabbit	noun	traditionally counted with 〜わ!
6	ぞう (象)	zou	elephant	noun	counted with 〜とう
7	うま (馬)	uma	horse	noun	counted with 〜とう
8	うし (牛)	ushi	cow	noun	counted with 〜とう
9	きんぎょ (金魚)	kingyo	goldfish	noun	きん=gold, ぎょ=fish
10	ペット	petto	pet	noun	from English "pet"
11	どうぶつえん (動物園)	doubutsuen	zoo	noun	どうぶつ=animal, えん=garden
12	すいそう (水槽)	suisou	fish tank / aquarium	noun	すい=water, そう=tank
13	のうじょう (農場)	noujou	farm	noun	
14	〜ひき (〜匹)	~hiki	counter for small animals	counter	1=いっぴき, 3=さんびき, 6=ろっぴき △
15	〜とう (〜頭)	~tou	counter for large animals	counter	fairly regular — 1=いっとう only oddity
16	〜わ (〜羽)	~wa	counter for birds (and rabbits!)	counter	3=さんわ/さんば, 10=じゅっぱ △

#	JAPANESE	ROMAJI	ENGLISH	TYPE	NOTE
17	います	imasu	to be / to exist (living things)	verb	use います for people & animals; あります for objects
18	かいます (飼います)	kaimasu	to keep / raise (a pet)	verb	ペットを飼っています = I have a pet
19	かぞえます (数えます)	kazoemasu	to count	verb	ichidan verb: かぞえる
20	みます (見ます)	mimasu	to look at / watch	verb	どうぶつをみます = I look at animals

⚠ **います vs. あります — a vital distinction:** When saying something exists or is somewhere, Japanese uses two different verbs. **います** (imasu) is used for living things — people, animals, insects. **あります** (arimasu) is used for inanimate objects and plants. So **ねこがさんびきいます** (there are three cats) but **ほんがさんさつあります** (there are three books). Getting this right sounds natural instantly. Bonus rabbit fact: **うさぎ** (rabbits) are traditionally counted with **〜わ** (the bird counter) because in old Japan, rabbits were classified as birds to get around meat-eating restrictions during Buddhist periods — so **うさぎをにわかっています** is perfectly correct Japanese!