**From Farmland to the High Peaks**

**Living in Harmony with the Land**

The Minami Alps area is relatively compact and accessible, allowing visitors to experience several environments during their visit: from the traces of the s*atoyama* villages that flourished between the foothills of the mountains and arable land, to the diverse wildlife and plant life that make their home on the steep slopes.

The term *satoyama* refers to settlements at the foot of mountains, where the inhabitants lived in harmony with nature, usually combining small-scale agriculture with forestry. The clean meltwater flowing from the peaks would be used to create rice fields, while stands of oak and other trees could be turned into charcoal. Even building materials would be gathered locally, such as Japanese silver grass (*susuki*) used to build thatched roofs. The thick forests were mostly left untouched, with people only venturing there to hunt or engage in light forestry.

For centuries, many of these mountains were uncharted territory. Besides often being too dangerous and steep to enter, many were seen as the home of *kami*, deities or spirits, and therefore off-limits to humans. Thanks to this lack of human interference, the mountains are home to a variety of animals.

The *satoyama* concept is still present in areas near Japan’s national parks, as people continue to live in the foothills of these nature preserves. However, higher up in the mountains there are no remaining settlements, and some areas are off-limits to human visitors, allowing the wild creatures of the Minami Alps to roam freely.

About 30 species of mammals live in the area, such as Japanese macaques, red foxes (*kitsune*), racoon dogs (*tanuki*), and deer. As the macaques and deer have proliferated, nowadays farmers need to use fences to protect the lowland fruit orchards from creatures looking for a snack. Even high in the mountains, fences are used to safeguard delicate alpine plants.

Various songbirds live in the mountains, such as the striking blue-and-white flycatcher (*oruri*), which can be recognized by its beautiful song. The rock ptarmigan (*raicho*) is one of the region’s most famous birds, and this denizen of the peaks is considered a protected species in Japan.

Some of the large mammals that make their home in the forests and mountains include the Asian black bear, also known as the moon bear (*tsukinowaguma*) for its distinctive white chest markings, and Japanese serow (*kamoshika*). The Japanese stoat (*okojo*) prefers to live at high altitudes, blending into the landscape with a coat that is brown and white in summer, and pure white in winter. During the warmer seasons, hikers may spot colorful butterflies flitting across the slopes.