**World Natural Heritage Site Shirakami Sanchi: Akita Prefecture Area**

The mountainous wilderness of Shirakami Sanchi stretches across 130,000 hectares of Akita and Aomori Prefectures. Of this, 16,971 hectares comprise the largest remaining primeval beech forest in East Asia, one largely untouched by human activity for over 8,000 years. This area was registered as the Shirakami Sanchi World Natural Heritage Site in 1993, and was among the first in Japan to be given the UNESCO designation (along with forests on the island of Yakushima, in Kagoshima Prefecture).

The World Natural Heritage Site is divided into two zones: a protected core zone where access is restricted, and a buffer zone around that core, where visitors can observe much of the same flora, fauna, and terrain that are found in the core zone. Approximately a quarter of the World Natural Heritage Site is located in Akita Prefecture, where access to the site is more tightly controlled than on the Aomori side.

At the heart of the virgin forest’s diverse ecosystem is the *buna*, or Japanese beech. This keystone species can grow taller than 30 meters and live for centuries. In regions with heavy snowfall, like the northern prefectures bordering the Sea of Japan, beeches have a natural advantage over other species. Young beech trees are extremely flexible, and they bend under the weight of heavy snow that would snap or uproot other trees. As a result, beeches make up a large percentage of the forest. They bear fruit and nuts eaten by animals, and their broad leaves keep the forest cool in summer. After the leaves fall, they contribute to the rich humus of the forest floor. This decaying carpet sprouts undergrowth that, together with the beeches’ roots, regulates water levels and helps prevent droughts, floods, and landslides.

Although old-growth beech forests once covered much of the country, today they are extremely rare. Before their ecological importance was understood, beeches were considered largely useless, their wood unsuited to most crafts or construction. In fact, the character used to write “beech” is a combination of the characters for “tree” and “nothing.” Consequently, many of Japan’s beech trees were cut down in the second half of the twentieth century, and the land was replanted with cedars intended for the lumber harvest. Luckily, the remote location and steep slopes of Shirakami Sanchi protected the area from significant exploitation, preserving it for people today.

In addition to beeches, approximately 100 other tree species and thousands of plant and animal species live in Shirakami Sanchi’s forests. There are 35 mammal species recorded, including the Asian black bear, the Japanese macaque, and the Japanese serow (*kamoshika*), a bovine that resembles a shaggy deer. Other local fauna include 9 reptile species, 13 amphibian species, and 90 species of bird—including the rare black woodpecker, the largest of its family in Japan.

The steep mountainsides of Shirakami Sanchi are punctuated with deep valleys, many of them carved by swift-flowing rivers and waterfalls. Some of the area’s highest peaks are Mt. Fujisato-Komagatake (1,158 m), Mt. Futatsumori (1,086 m), and Mt. Kodake (1,042 m).

One of the lowest mountains in the region is Mt. Tomeyama (180 m). *Tome* means “stop” or “prohibit,” and logging was forbidden on Tomeyama’s slopes more than 300 years ago in recognition of the role of the beech forest in preserving local water levels for agriculture. This connection was again brought home in modern times when beeches near the Subari Dam were felled, resulting in a significant drop in Subari Lake. This event proved a catalyst for protecting Shirakami’s forests and gaining recognition as a World Natural Heritage Site.