

On a clear day at Zao, when the ski conditions are at their best, the mountain's ropeways and ski trails fill with locals and travelers alike. From the Jupeer Base Center to Jizo Sancho Station at the peak, skiers and boarders of many ages and skill levels are everywhere. But when the sun has just begun to climb in the sky and the trails have not yet become packed with figures in parkas and snowpants, visitors can share a quiet moment with the towering pack of imposing white figures that amass on the southern slope—the famous Snow Monsters of Zao.

The Snow Monsters (or Ice Monsters) are called *juhyo* in Japanese. The word means “frost-covered trees,” but when you're up close, walking or skiing among them, nothing so benign comes to mind. They seem to stomp across the landscape, beautiful and otherworldly. The *juhyo* are Maries' Fir trees that have been transformed by the dry winds of the Siberian desert. These winds sweep across the Sea of Japan, rolling over the peaks of the Asahi mountain range and passing over the Shirataka Hills and Yamagata Basin before releasing super-cooled droplets of rain that do not freeze even at several degrees below zero. The Snow Monsters of Zao are born when these droplets meld with the snow on the mountain. The Snow Monsters do not last very long, and they have been shrinking in size and number due to global climate change, but they are still a sight to behold. They are at the apex of their growth between late January and mid-March.

Located farther down the slopes, the Frosted Forest (*muhyo chitai*) is a silver grove filled with wind-whipped ice. This silver frost is formed when condensed water vapor is exposed to freezing air. Dew on the stems of grass and leaves is caught in a slow freeze. Swept together, the dew becomes translucent ice that refracts the light like silver filigree. Like a garden of glistening timber chrysalises, the Frosted Forest is most picturesque around the same time that the Snow Monsters become most imposing. Both are easily reachable from the main Juhyogen Course and can be reached by skiers of any level. The mountain is serviced by several ropeways, and the view from these is a wonder in its own right. The condition of both the Frozen Forest and Snow Monsters may vary depending upon weather conditions, but the best time to view them is during the colder hours of the morning.