

The Appi Beech Forest of Hachimantai

Some 100 hectares of natural beech forest can be found in the Appi highlands of Hachimantai in northern Iwate. From centuries ago wood harvested here provided not only a source of charcoal, but also the base material for lacquerware products, a local craft tradition that continues today. People lived in symbiosis with the trees, harvesting what they needed and tending the growth of saplings where old growth had been cut.

The beech trees that stand here today are so-called secondary forest, grown from the seedlings of mature trees that were felled for their wood and the making of charcoal in the 1930s. Look for the mother trees that still stand in places, recognizable immediately by their sheer size. The trees of a secondary forest can take as long as 100 years to attain the girth and height of those found in a fully matured woodland. Someday, they will give way to new growth and the cycle of rebirth will begin again. The Appi beech forest displays nature's wonders at any time of year, but especially noteworthy are the fresh greenery of early summer and the brilliant golden-bronze foliage of early October. Wood chips laid on the trails make it possible for visitors on wheelchairs to enjoy the offerings of this place, too.

In terms of ecology, beech trees have excellent water holding capacity. The sweet, clean air of a beech forest comes from the rain water these trees absorb and slowly release back into their surroundings. Their nuts are favored by many animals from squirrels to bears. The bark of some trees in the Appi beech forest of Hachimantai shows the telltale signs of bear claws. This forest has a close connection with horses and cows, too. It thrived over the centuries when livestock were kept on the surrounding land, as their grazing kept the spread of bamboo grass in check. (Thick clumps of fast-growing bamboo grass competing for light can prevent tiny beech seedlings from sprouting and taking root.) Hiring a guide to explore the forest together opens up a world of wisdom on these and other aspects of the local ecosystem. Contact the Hachimantai tourist association for referrals.