

Wakoto Nature Trail: an ecosystem powered by geothermal energy

The Wakoto Peninsula juts out into Lake Kussharo, the largest caldera lake in Japan. The approximately 2.5-kilometer nature trail winds around the peninsula through a forest of Sakhalin fir and giant Katsura trees to Oyakotsu Jigoku. This is a rocky cliff that plunges down into the lake, where boiling water bubbles between rocks at the waterline, and steam spouts from cracks in the rock face. The geothermal energy in this area directly affects the surrounding forest ecosystem—wildflowers grow in abundance, cicadas sing in the summer, and band-legged ground crickets are active in the freezing winter thanks to the warm microclimate at ground level, where they live among vegetation.

The black woodpecker is another noteworthy inhabitant of the area. Japan's indigenous people, the Ainu, worshipped the black woodpecker as “the god of boat craft.” Legend suggests the Ainu were inspired to make their *marukibune* (traditional Ainu canoes) after seeing the holes the woodpeckers make in the trunks of trees. The Wakoto Nature Trail takes around one hour to complete; the path rises and falls, and some sections are quite steep. If you walk clockwise around the peninsula, a long wooden staircase leads down to Oyakotsu Jigoku. There is a natural hot spring at the trailhead, where you can relax after completing the loop around the peninsula. It is possible to walk either clockwise or counterclockwise around the peninsula, but the clockwise route is easier considering the long staircase near Oyakotsu Jigoku.