

【Jigokudani Wild Snow Monkey Park】

The Nagano Dentetsu train company established Jigokudani Wild Snow Monkey Park in 1964 to attract visitors to the remote Yokoyu River Valley. It was envisioned as way of reducing conflict between humans and Japanese macaques as nearby towns expanded and monkeys increasingly stole from farms, begged food, and blocked the roads. The park strives to influence the monkeys' behavior as little as possible while providing a rare opportunity for visitors to observe them up close. The monkeys remain wild and are free to come and go as they please.

Japanese macaques (*Macaca fuscata*), or “snow monkeys,” are species endemic to Japan and the world's northernmost nonhuman primates. The troop here has around 160 members, and they venture about 2 kilometers into the surrounding mountains. Most of the year, the monkeys are fed barley with chaff by park employees, and they are regularly provided with apples and soybeans, two of their favorite foods.

The monkeys have become famous for warming their bodies in the hot spring during the winter, when temperatures drop to negative 10 degrees Celsius or below. This learned behavior is quite rare for this species—generally, Japanese macaques do not like to get wet. It is said that young monkeys here began playing in the baths at the nearby Kōrakukan inn and gradually became acclimated to the sensation. As adults, the females then carried their babies with them into the water, passing their fondness for bathing to the next generation. Early in the park's existence, park officials noticed this unusual behavior and decided to construct a bath exclusively for the monkeys to use.

Outside of winter, when the weather is warmer, The monkeys rarely enter the water. Instead, each season has its own unique scenes: in spring, the park is filled with mothers cradling gawky newborns, summer is marked by the lively antics of playful juveniles, and autumn by the bright scarlet faces that signal the arrival of the mating season.