

***Raicho*—The Rock Ptarmigan**

An Elusive Alpine Bird

While hiking on the highest slopes of the Minami Alps, lucky visitors may spot one of the rarest birds in Japan. These mountains are the southernmost point in the world where the rock ptarmigan (*raicho*) can be found. *Raicho* means “thunder bird” in Japanese. According to legend, the birds will often appear during thunderstorms, and it is said they offer protection against lightning and fire.

Rock ptarmigans are members of the grouse family and are about the size of a small chicken. From spring to autumn their plumage is mottled, allowing them to blend in with rocks, turning white as the winter and snow approach.

While not particularly shy birds, their habit of living under low-growing trees such as the Japanese stone pine (*haimatsu*; *Pinus pumila*) and tendency to run rather than fly make them hard to spot. The best time to spot *raicho* is in the early summer, when the males croak and take flight to attract females—although only experienced climbers should attempt climbing these steep mountains when there is still snow underfoot.

The Japanese rock ptarmigan population is of great interest to naturalists worldwide because this is the southernmost location where they are found in the northern hemisphere. However, the number of rock ptarmigans in the Minami Alps has declined in recent years. Research is ongoing to determine whether climate change, predation, the presence of invasive plant species, or other factors are causing the decline. While not threatened globally, the rock ptarmigan is considered a protected species in Japan, and this treasured resident of the Alps is also the symbol of the Minami Alps Biosphere Reserve and the official bird of Nagano, Gifu, and Toyama prefectures.