

Amami Rabbit Observation Hut

The Amami rabbit is a nocturnal species found only on Tokunoshima and neighboring Amami Oshima. It is thickset, with a dark coat, short feet and legs, and large claws adapted to digging. It is related to prehistoric ancestors that once roamed continental Asia and can grow to a body length of around 50 centimeters and weigh up to 3 kilograms. The rabbit lives in forests and feeds mainly on grasses and large acorns. It breeds up to twice a year and is unusual among rabbits in bearing only one, or sometimes two, young at a time. When mothers go out to forage, they seal the entrance of the burrow with earth and camouflage it with plants. They live separately from their young, returning every other day on average to nurse them.

Environmental Pressures

With few natural predators, the Amami rabbit was undisturbed until relatively recently. Rising numbers of feral cats and dogs are an increasing threat. Land development, too, has encroached on the rabbit's natural habitat and led to many being hit by cars. The government declared the species a Designated Natural Monument in 1963, while the Ministry of the Environment designated the Amami rabbit a rare wild animal in 2004. Efforts to protect it have succeeded in stabilizing the population, which is estimated at a few hundred.

Rabbit Watching

A major hub of the rabbit protection effort is the Amami Rabbit Observation Hut, which houses displays and serves as a center for research into the animal's behavior. Video cameras installed near the hut and around the adjacent Nanbu Dam capture footage of the rabbits, which is screened in the hut. The footage is shown on local cable TV nightly from midnight to 6 a.m., along with a monthly digest of highlights. Some of the rabbits' favorite vegetation has been planted around the hut, and staff have built a tunnel to encourage the creatures to visit the area. Being nocturnal, they are highly unlikely to be spotted during the day. The hut won a government Cool Japan Award in the National Park category in 2019.

Access

The Amami Rabbit Observation Hut is located in the mountain forest of Tobe, about 25 minutes' drive from the airport and about 15 minutes from the Amagi-cho city hall.

Visitors need to be accompanied by a staff member, so book in advance by telephoning the city hall (0997-85-5178); the city hall is open during normal business hours, but help is available only in Japanese. Night-time animal tours probably offer the best chance of spotting an Amami rabbit. Local guides can drive participants around the mountain roads, including to the observation hut.