

## **Wonderful Forest: Guided Tours through the Heart of Yambaru**

The importance of the Yambaru forest ecosystem to future generations was formally recognized with its designation as a national park in 2016 and its inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2020.

To ensure sustainable tourism at Yambaru, the three municipalities of Kunigami, Ogimi, and Higashi have created a guide certification system, as well as a website called Wonderful Forest that connects visitors with certified guides.

Much of the fauna found here is distinctive, including the flightless Yambaru *kuina* (Okinawa rail) and the long-armed scarab beetle. The botanical diversity is also remarkable. Besides the ubiquitous evergreen *itajii* that gives the forest its distinctive look, the area is home to the sturdy Ryukyu pine, swaying *irukanda* vines, and the Paleozoic flying spider-monkey fern. Over the centuries, human settlements relied on the Yambaru forest for timber, fuel, water, and other resources.

The life and beauty of Yambaru can be hard to recognize, however, and the traces of longstanding human habitation are also easy to overlook. Through the Wonderful Forest website, visitors can engage a local guide to explore the forest's secrets, from camouflaged tree-climbing lizards to long-abandoned charcoal kilns. Each guide has specific topics of expertise based on their lived experience, and English-speaking guides are available. A guide from Wonderful Forest will help you see beyond the surface and understand the true heart of Yambaru.