

Yambaru Kuina no Mori (Okinawa Rail Ecology Center)

The Yambaru *kuina*, also known as the Okinawa rail, is a flightless but fleet-footed bird found only in northern Okinawa. It is also the official symbol of Kunigami Village. You may be lucky enough to glimpse one foraging in the forest, but the ecology center is the only place where the bird can be seen in captivity.

Once known as the *agachaa* or *agachi*, meaning “jumpy” or “nervous,” the Yambaru *kuina* is able to run at speeds up to 40 kilometers per hour, and can spring directly from the ground into low-hanging branches, where it roosts for protection from predators. It appears to be highly intelligent and is perhaps even able to recognize itself in mirrors. It washes itself several times a day in streams or pools, finishing with a remarkable outstretched-wing pose. The bird’s favorite food is the Yambaru snail; it breaks them open on rocks to eat them.

Fossil evidence shows the Yambaru *kuina* once inhabited the whole island of Okinawa, but its range shrank to the forested north due to human encroachment and threats like the mongoose, which was introduced in 1910 to hunt vipers. At one point, the *kuina* population may have dropped as low as 700, but numbers are recovering thanks to teams of “Mongoose Busters” that aim to eliminate the predator from the island. Conservation and breeding programs are also under way. With luck, the Yambaru *kuina* will endure as long as the Yambaru forest itself.