

Welcome to Yambaru National Park

Yambaru National Park occupies only 0.1 percent of Japan's land area but accounts for an outsized share of the country's biodiversity. Long separation from the mainland and relative inaccessibility from southern Okinawa have made the forest a haven for specialized native species. But the Yambaru forest is not untouched or primeval. On the contrary, it has been shaped by centuries of human activity.

From premodern times through the early postwar period, the forest supplied timber and charcoal to the entire island. The residents of the small villages dotting the coast of the Kunigami Peninsula went into the mountains to fell trees together, selling them to the so-called Yambaru boats that came up from the south. This system eventually developed into a network of sophisticated village cooperatives that provided a model for similar regional economies across Japan, many of which sent representatives to study it.

The villagers tended the forest with care, always planting enough to replace what they took. This was formalized in the eighteenth-century *somayama* system of celebrated Ryukyu Kingdom administrator Sai On, whose insights were even studied by US occupiers after World War II.

Once postwar reconstruction was over and charcoal gave way to gas and electricity as the main energy sources, demand for the forest's resources ebbed. Even though many villages turned to farming instead of timber, the tradition of caring for the forest survived.

An Ancient Haven

Most of the Kunigami Peninsula was formed 70 to 90 million years ago, but Cape Hedo in the far north is thought to be at least 250 million years old. Karst formations of eroded limestone lend a stark beauty to the coast, and striking features like Mt. Hedo (Asumi Utaki) show signs of ancient geological upheaval, with once-level rock strata now exposed and rising almost vertically into the sky.

The fauna of Yambaru National Park is remarkably diverse. In the absence of large mammalian predators, countless smaller species have thrived, from insects such as the long-armed scarab beetle and the Ryukyu damselfly to reptiles and amphibians like Ishikawa's frog, the sword-tailed newt, and the Okinawan pit viper. Yambaru also has many charismatic avian residents, including the flightless Yambaru *kuina* or Okinawa rail, the industrious Okinawa woodpecker, the striking ruddy kingfisher, and the friendly Ryukyu robin, which is believed to have inspired tales of the *bunagaya*,

a forest spirit that takes the form of a cheerful red-headed boy.

The forest flora is dominated by the *itajii*, an evergreen relative of the beech tree that was a mainstay of Yambaru's timber industry, and which gives the forest its feathery look when viewed from afar. Alongside grow sturdy oaks, Paleozoic flying spider-monkey ferns, flowering needlewood trees, and many others. In contrast to vivid tropical islands like Iriomote, the soft hues of Yambaru have been likened to a watercolor painting. Engaging a local guide is highly recommended to fully appreciate the subtle beauty of the forest and the presence of its shy, diminutive fauna.

A Friendly Request: Help Stop Roadkill!

Rare species like the Yambaru *kuina* are highly vulnerable to traffic accidents, particularly in breeding season. If you are driving, please help make Kunigami's "Stop Roadkill" campaign a success and use caution as you drive on the forest roads.