

Forest Learning Zone

The Forest Learning Zone is returning to the wild. Prior to 1926, the land was used for logging and pasturage, but with the construction of the Nasu Imperial Villa, the forest began a return to its natural state. It is still young, as forests go, but with proper care it will one day become a mature forest.

To maintain the delicate balance between conservation and educational use of the natural environment, access to the zone is limited. Visitors can enter the Forest Learning Zone only on pre-booked, guided tours led by specialized “nature interpreters.” The guides explain the interdependence of life in the forest and point out details such as an unusual bark texture, an echoing bird call, or the astringent scent of a crushed leaf. Using samples and visual aids in addition to the forest around them, the guides reveal aspects of forest ecology that hikers might never notice on a simple walk through the woods.

One concept the guides discuss is that of a “keystone species.” In the Learning Zone, the four resident species of woodpecker are considered keystone species because they play an unusually large role in maintaining the entire ecosystem. Since most woodpecker species only use their nests for one year, their abandoned holes provide a constant supply of new homes for dormice, Japanese giant flying squirrels, owls, bees, little Japanese horseshoe bats, Japanese tits, and other small animals.

Nature interpreters might point out the tactile differences in two varieties of bamboo grass that carpet the forest floor. *Miyakozasa* leaves have hairy undersides, but *chishimazasa* leaves are smooth on both sides. The two species are found here because Nasu Heisei-no-mori Forest straddles two climatic zones: *miyakozasa* is typically found along the Pacific coast, while *chishimazasa* is common on the Sea of Japan coast, which receives heavier snowfalls.