

## Nasu in Spring

Hiking season in the Nasu area begins in early May, although snow often lingers on the mountain peaks until later in the month. The forests of beech and birch, which cover much of the landscape, come alive after a bleak winter. The badgers, raccoon dogs (*tanuki*), black bears, and many other hibernating species emerge and begin to forage. Paradise flycatchers, blue-and-white flycatchers, Japanese thrushes, and other birds migrating from Southeast Asia arrive between early April and May.

The Manchurian violet, a variety native to East Asia, is the first to flower in low-lying areas, followed by other plants in the same family. Cherry trees begin to blossom in April, followed by hydrangeas and rhododendrons. In the western highlands, skunk cabbage and Oriental swamp pink bloom in the Numappara Marshland as soon as the snow melts—in fact, eastern skunk cabbage is able to melt the snow itself with its purple, heat-generating flower spikes. These spikes, which are specialized leaves wrapped around a hidden flower cluster, are the source of the plant's Japanese name: *zazensō*, or “Zen meditation plant.” The outer spike (spathe) is like the walls of a cave, and the unformed flower stalk inside evokes the Zen monk Daruma, who is said to have meditated in a cave for nine years.

On the rocky mountain slopes, endemic *hime-iwa-kagami* (*Schizocodon ilicifolius*) blooms in April and May. Its Japanese name means “lady-rock-mirror,” a reference to the plant's dainty, fringed flowers, its glossy, mirror-like leaves, and its rocky habitat. From mid- to late May, around 200,000 azaleas of several species fill the 23-hectare Yahata Azalea Park.

Japanese black salamanders and Tohoku salamanders appear between late April and late May, laying their eggs in streams and wetlands like the Numappara Marshland. Montane brown frogs and Japanese common toads spawn in mid-May. Forest green tree frogs encase their eggs in spongelike foam and suspend them from tree branches that hang over water; when the tadpoles hatch, they fall into the water below.