

The Kikyogahara Plain

The Kikyogahara Plain stretches out near the top of Mt. Norikura. Its 2,700-meter altitude makes it an excellent habitat for Siberian dwarf pine, an evergreen shrub that grows up to 5 meters high. The pines at Kikyogahara grow to around knee height. Another common name for these shrubs is “creeping pine,” as they tend to spread horizontally across a large area. These slow-growing plants can live for up to 1,000 years.

Rock ptarmigans (*raicho*) nest beneath the Siberian dwarf pines. This protected species is rare and elusive, but may be spotted in its natural habitat at Kikyogahara. The name *raicho* literally translates as “thunder bird,” and is said to be based on the bird’s affinity for living at high altitudes. The *raicho* is also known as the “bird of the gods,” since it lives high up where the mountain spirits are said to dwell. This medium-sized grouse molts three times per year, changing its plumage from white to brown, then black, before returning to white again for winter.

Kikyogahara is easily accessible from both Matsumoto, in Nagano Prefecture, and Takayama, in Gifu Prefecture, by either bus or taxi. A “Watch the Sunrise” bus departing from Hirayu Onsen arrives at Norikura (Tatamidaira) Bus Terminal in time for visitors to see the sunrise, along with early morning views over the Hotaka mountain range, on clear days in the summer.