

Animal Life of the Tanigawa Mountain Range: Mammals, Birds, Reptiles, and Amphibians

The Minakami area comprises a mountain zone (700–1,600 m) and a subalpine zone (1,600 m and above). This environment supports a variety of mammals, such as the Asian black bear, Japanese serow, and Japanese macaque, as well as many species of both migratory and sedentary birds.

Although the mountain range scarcely exceeds 2,000 meters in height, the heavy snowfall and strong winds at the higher elevations support several alpine species. Mt. Tanigawadake is home to alpine passerines (“perching birds”), including the alpine accentors and Japanese accentors that live in the rocky cliffs above the tree line. Lower down the mountain, tree-dwelling birds such as the eye-catching Narcissus flycatcher and Japanese flycatcher live in the beech forests. After the beeches die, pygmy woodpeckers and Eurasian nuthatches build nests in their trunks. The brilliantly colored common kingfisher and strikingly plumed crested kingfisher can be spotted along the river’s edge.

Of the native reptile species, visitors should watch for venomous snake species such as the Japanese pit viper (*mamushi*) and tiger keelback (*yamakagashi*). The tiger keelback, which gets its toxin from eating poisonous toads, can be identified by the bright red markings on its sides. Mt. Tanigawadake is also home to the adolescent Japanese rat snake, whose brown stripes closely resemble those of the pit viper, but the rat snake is harmless. Minakami’s other reptiles include turtles, such as the Japanese pond turtle, and lizards such as the Japanese skink, which can be identified as a juvenile by its long, blue tail. The amphibians native to the area include two species that have been designated Special Natural Monuments: the Tohoku salamander and the forest green tree frog. Beginning each year in May, the tree frogs lay their eggs in sticky bunches on leaves hanging over the water at ponds near Tenjindaira.

Mt. Tanigawadake is also home to the Japanese dormouse, another of Japan’s Special Natural Monuments. This tiny mouse lives high in the trees, where it builds nests in their trunks. During summer, they eat seeds, berries, and insects to fatten themselves in preparation for winter hibernation, when they curl into a ball and sleep for several months. During hibernation, their heart rates slow and their body temperatures drop almost to freezing. If you search carefully, you can find a Japanese dormouse hibernating in this room!