

Nature Conservation Activities: Experiencing Life in Hiruzen, Preserving Life in Hiruzen

People in the Hiruzen Highlands have preserved the traditions of life in Japan's upland valleys, where long ago the residents of small hamlets learned to farm the forested slopes and make sustainable use of limited resources. Their land-management techniques work in balance with nature, husbanding and supporting delicate habitats. Rice fields, reservoirs, and irrigation canals provide feeding grounds for migrating birds and are important to the life cycles of creatures like frogs, fireflies, and dragonflies. Such environments meet the needs of inhabitants while also ensuring the survival of native species.

In Maniwa, visitors are invited to better understand this way of life through participation. Listed below are some examples of local management and conservation activities that visitors may enjoy. Please stop by the town visitor center to find out what options are currently available. Staff will be happy to provide guidance and contact local organizations.

***Yamayaki* (Controlled Burns)**

Each spring, low-intensity, managed fires are set in the hills around Hiruzen. This practice, known as *yamayaki*, prevents the semi-natural grasslands from reverting to forest, maintaining a vital habitat for endangered grassland flora and fauna.

***Kayakari* (Thatch Cutting)**

Kayakari, the autumn harvest of tall reeds and grasses like silvergrass, promotes the regeneration of wildflowers that would otherwise lose out in the competition for sunlight. In modern times, the cut reeds are no longer needed to thatch houses, but local residents still carry out Maniwa's harvest each year. The grasses are used for compost and animal fodder, and to repair the thatch on traditional buildings.

Wild Grapes

The wine and juice at Hiruzen Winery is made from a wild grape known as *yamabudō* (*Vitis coignetiae*). This species, which is endemic to Japan, produces smaller, tarter grapes than domesticated strains and requires very particular conditions to produce flowers or fruit. As a result, trellises at the winery need constant care to ensure a bountiful harvest. Visitors are welcome to try their hand at pruning, pollinating, and harvesting.

Hiruzen's residents hope that inviting visitors to share in these activities will help to preserve traditional practices for future generations, as well as foster human connections and an appreciation of the age-old knowledge that remains a part of everyday life in Maniwa.