

The Great Outdoors: Plant and Animal Life

When the land mass that became the Amami Islands separated from the Eurasian continent, it carried with it a diverse collection of plant and animal species. While some species became extinct elsewhere, they survived on the islands by adapting and evolving to their environment. Today, 90 percent of the amphibians, 57 percent of the mammals, and 63 percent of the reptiles on Amami Oshima are species endemic to the island.

An Endangered Icon

The *Amami no kuro-usagi*, or Amami black rabbit (also known as the Ryukyu rabbit) is endemic to Amami Oshima and neighboring Tokunoshima. This short-eared, dark-furred rabbit has powerful claws for digging nests. It has been designated a Special *Natural Monument of Japan*, and is on the Ministry of the Environment's endangered list. Recent conservation efforts, however, have helped raise its numbers to acceptable levels. The only daylight signs of this nocturnal herbivore are the small oval droppings found on the roadside—where the rabbit feels safer from predators—and the gnawed foliage close to the ground.

Other representative animals endemic to the island are the Amami jay (*Garrulus lidthi*), the Amami spiny rat (*Tokudaia osimensis*), and the colorful Amami Oshima frog (*Odorrana splendida*), which was recently designated a Cultural Property.

The island's plant life is just as diverse, as the landscape is a dense mixture of temperate, tropical, and subtropical species. Primeval broadleaf forests cover the mountains, and vegetation thrives on the coasts. The island also supports both sago palms, which are ubiquitous, and the rare *modama* (*Entada tonkinensis*)—a thick, lengthy leguminous vine with seed pods that grow up to 1 meter long.