

Wildlife: *Habu*

The *habu*, a venomous snake endemic to the Ryukyu Islands and found all over Amami Oshima, has long provoked both fear and awe. The snake, which grows to an average length of 1.3 meters, has inhabited these islands far longer than humans; scientific evidence suggests the *habu* diverged from related species in southern China some 10 million years ago. Over the years, the *habu* on the various islands have evolved and developed different characteristics. Their island origin can be easily identified through their size, color, shape, and even venom composition.

Snake Bounty

Habu are a normal part of life on Amami Oshima, and islanders have learned to coexist with them, which includes educating children on how to react to unexpected encounters. Farmers, taxi drivers, and other people who are likely to encounter *habu* on a regular basis carry snake-catching sticks and boxes to hold the snakes until they can turn them in at designated municipal locations for a monetary bounty of 3,000 yen. Visitors may spot the snake-catching equipment for sale in local shops and supermarkets. Souvenirs and craft items made from the skin, bones, and other parts of the *habu* are sold in dedicated shops, while entire snakes are sometimes preserved in alcohol as an elixir.

The Mongoose Problem

Small Indian mongooses were imported in 1979 in a misguided attempt to combat the *habu*. Unfortunately, the mongooses had few natural enemies on the island, and became an invasive species that damaged crops and preyed on many native animals, including the Amami black rabbit, frogs, and birds. A program initiated by the Ministry of the Environment to eradicate the mongooses using traps and other methods has been successful, and the native animal populations are recovering.