

Daisetsuzan National Park: Overview

Rugged mountain ranges, volcanic landscapes, mixed forests, and pristine lakes are part of the striking natural scenery of Daisetsuzan National Park. At 2,268 square kilometers, it is Japan's largest land-based national park. Towering, snow-capped volcanic peaks give the park its name, which means "the soaring snowy mountains." The park is divided into three areas: Omote-Taisetsu in the north, Higashi-Taisetsu in the southeast, and the Tokachidake mountain range in the southwest.

Omote-Taisetsu

The Daisetsuzan volcanic group, which comprises much of the Omote-Taisetsu area, is made up of multiple volcanoes surrounding a large caldera. Alpine flowers such as Aleutian avens and yellow azaleas brighten the mountainsides in the spring and summer, attracting butterflies like the yellow-winged Eversmann's parnassian and the intricately-patterned Freija fritillary.

Mt. Asahidake (2,291 m) is the tallest peak in Hokkaido, and an active volcano. Popular with hikers for its alpine meadows and volcanic steam vents, it is accessible via the Asahidake Ropeway. Mt. Kurodake (1,984 m) is another popular mountain, with easy access to the hot-spring village of Sounkyo Onsen via a ropeway. After a climb, hikers can relax in the hot springs or explore Sounkyo, a gorge with cascading waterfalls and towering, pillar-like cliffs made up of columnar formations. There are several walking trails along the river gorge, as well as white-water rafting tours.

The trail up Mt. Akadake (2,078 m) starts at Ginsendai, an hour's drive from Sounkyo. It is known for its seasonal beauty in fall, when the mountainside bursts with stunning colors. Autumn begins in mid-September in Daisetsuzan, arriving earlier there than in any other part of Japan.

The Kogen Onsen hot-spring area in the interior of Omote-Taisetsu has many wetlands and sustains a large population of brown bears. It may be possible to observe them from a distance when exploring the marshes. Visitors should be sure to register at the Brown Bear Information Center at the marsh trailhead and attend the mandatory safety lecture before setting out.

Higashi-Taisetsu

The steep, rugged peaks of the Ishikari mountain range tower over the dense forests of the Tokachi-Mitsumata Caldera in Higashi-Taisetsu. Many birds and animals inhabit these woodlands of Yezo spruce, Sakhalin fir, and Erman's birch, including the

Blakiston's fish owl, the Eurasian three-toed woodpecker, and the Siberian flying squirrel.

Lake Shikaribetsu is a high-altitude lake at the southeast end of the park. Its tranquil waters are ideal for activities such as canoeing and kayaking. It is surrounded by several small peaks and a dense, moss-covered forest. The northern pika, a small rabbit-like mammal with a shrill cry, inhabits the rocky fringes of the forest.

Lake Nukabira was created with the completion of the Nukabira Dam in 1956. For half the year its waters hide the arched Taushubetsu River Bridge, a relic of the Shihoro Line railway, which used to run through the area. The bridge is revealed when the water levels in the lake drop from winter through spring, earning it the nickname "phantom bridge."

Tokachidake mountain range

The Tokachi area is dominated by the peaks of the Tokachi volcanic group. Mt. Tokachidake (2,077 m), the highest of these, is dotted with volcanic vents and craters. Trailheads for hiking excursions in the area start from many of the hot-spring towns in the foothills, including Shirogane Onsen and Tokachidake Onsen. Mt. Furanodake (1,912 m), which is accessible from Tokachidake Onsen, has a picturesque wetland, Genshigahara, on its eastern slope. In early summer, clusters of fluffy white cotton grass cover the wetland.