

A Land of Heavy Snows

Japan is one of the snowiest countries in the world, and Japanese cities hold the top three positions for annual snowfall worldwide. Like the city of Myoko, the ranked cities lie along the Sea of Japan coast, where air currents coming off the water collide with the mountains to produce intense “lake-effect” snows. Life in the Myoko-Togakushi region is shaped by this heavy snowfall, and its effects are not limited to winter—snowmelt nourishes the park’s lush forests and wetlands and supplies the rivers and lakes that support human communities.

Snowfall in the Myoko-Togakushi Area

Just how much snow does the park get? Here is a look at the numbers:

- Greatest recorded accumulation: 5.1 meters
- Most snow in a single day: 1.5 meters
- Average number of days with snowfall: 142
- Earliest recorded snowfall: November 10
- Latest recorded snowfall: April 26
- Earliest recorded snowfall at Koya Pond: October 17
- Latest recorded snowfall at Koya Pond: May 19
- Average minimum temperature in February: -3°C

Why Is There So Much Snow?

Cold winds from Siberia blow southeast across the Sea of Japan, picking up moisture from the water. The winds carry that moisture to Japan’s coast, where they hit the mountains and are directed upward. As the winds rise, their temperature cools, causing the moisture they carry to condense and freeze into snow. The snow thus falls mainly on the seaward side of the mountains. Winds that pass over the mountains have lost most of their moisture, so areas further inland get less snow.

On the central island of Honshu, a long line of mountain ranges loosely parallels the coastline, like a spine bisecting the island into two general ecological zones: the Sea of Japan side and the Pacific Ocean side. Prefectures on the Pacific Ocean side typically experience milder winters than those along the Sea of Japan.

Life in the Snow Country

Local communities meet the challenge of heavy snows with several clever tools and modifications. Here are some of the innovations visitors may encounter around town.

Snow-Splitting Roofs

Tall roofs have dividers along the central ridgeline. Called “snow-splitting boards” (*yukiwari-ita*), they help snow to slide off the roof more easily by breaking its cohesion along the center line. If the snow does not slide off, it will continue to pile up and damage the roof.

Snow Dumps

Vacant lots near roadways are designated as “snow dumps” (*yuki suteba*): deposit sites for snow cleared from the roads by snowplows. Without these snow dumps, snow pushed to the sides of the road would accumulate and make the roads impassibly narrow.

Vertical Traffic Signals

While traffic lights are horizontal in most of the country, the parts of the park that get heavy snow hang their signals vertically to prevent the snow that collects on top from obscuring all three lights.

Snow-Melting Roads

In some parts of Japan, roadways are built with sprinkler systems that continually bathe the roads in warm groundwater to prevent snow and ice from accumulating. In Myoko, such sprinklers cannot overcome the extremely low temperatures, so some roads have heating systems installed below the surface.

Elevated Homes and Entryways

Many homes have elevated ground floors with steps leading up to the entryway. Some even have entrances on the second floor!

Tall Fire Hydrants

Fire hydrants are as tall as second-floor windows, with multiple hose attachment points at various heights to ensure they will remain accessible in deep snow.

Wintertime Fun

The Myoko-Togakushi region is ideal for winter recreation. Because it snows almost every day during winter, the ski slopes are continually replenished with fresh powder,

and downhill skiing, snowboarding, and sledding are always popular. Cross-country skiing and snowshoe treks are excellent ways of enjoying the forest in its winter garb, as well as encountering seldom-seen animals like the serow. (Guides and rental equipment are available for visitors.) Two lakes in the area—Lake Nojiri and Lake Reisenji—host wintertime fishing for Japanese pond smelt (*wakasagi*). Lake Reisenji freezes over, and is often dotted with the tents of people fishing through holes in the ice. On Lake Nojiri, fishing is done from inside warm, covered boats with specially adapted hulls.

The park's many hot springs are open year-round, but in winter residents often take a hot mineral bath to warm up and relax after a day in the snow. Many open-air baths (*rotenburo*) look out on views of snowy gardens or the distant, snow-capped mountains.

One of the Snowiest Places on Earth

Welcome to the winter landscape of Myoko-Togakushi renzan National Park. Five months of the year, heavy snows turn the region into an otherworldly terrain of tunnel-like roadways, snow-caves (*kamakura*), and ice-covered lakes. People explore the forest on skis and snowshoes, and roads become visible only by the 4-meter-high poles that mark their boundaries.

A Tiny Sleeper

This little creature is a Japanese dormouse, or *yamane*. *Yamane* live in trees, emerging from their nests at night to feed on fruit, insects, seeds, and flower nectar. When the snows come, they curl up in the holes of trees to hibernate. Their body temperatures drop sharply—far below that of most hibernating animals—to around 0°C. This allows them to consume their limited body fat more slowly while they sleep.