

Seasons Shaped by Snow and Water

The diverse landscapes of Myoko-Togakushi renzan National Park are tied to the region's heavy snowfall and abundant waterways. Thawing snow gives way to a rush of spring meltwater that nourishes vibrant growth throughout the spring and summer. When the cool nights of autumn arrive, the forest greenery turns into brilliant displays of color. Winter brings the greatest transformation of all, as the park is draped in a winter blanket of the whitest snow.

Sights of the Seasons

Spring

Spring arrives somewhat late in the Myoko-Togakushi area, where the heavy snow lingers until late April. As the land begins to thaw, torrents of meltwater rush down from the peaks, feeding the park's many lakes and waterfalls. Naena-taki Falls, a 55-meter waterfall in Myoko, is particularly dramatic in spring. Originally called "Earthquake Falls" (*naidaki*) for the roaring vibration created by its falling water, Naena-taki Falls is loud enough at peak flow to overwhelm conversation even at a distance.

Between mid-April and the end of May, thousands of Asian skunk cabbages (*mizubasho*) bloom in the park's many wetlands. Their spade-like white "petals" (actually modified leaves) encircle stalks of tiny yellow flowers.

Summer

Summer is an ideal time for hikes—particularly to the area's highest peaks, where cooler temperatures prevail above the timberline. On Mt. Hiuchi (2,462 m) and Mt. Myoko (2,454 m), rare alpine ecosystems support Siberian dwarf pines and alpine flowers like the wedgeleaf primrose.

The Yumemidaira area of the Sasagamine Highland has several hiking trails that travel past huge Japanese beeches and Japanese oaks, as well as through wetlands filled with an extraordinary diversity of summer flowers.

Autumn

Views of the changing autumn leaves are splendid throughout the park. Even so, the highland valley enclosing Koya-ike Pond, southeast of Mt. Hiuchi, is particularly well known for the brilliant colors of rowans, oaks, and maples on the surrounding slopes, as well as the vibrant orange leaves of aquatic plants called *iwaicho* that frame small pools at its center.

Another pond, the aptly named Kagami-ike ("Mirror") Pond, perfectly reflects the

autumn foliage and the craggy peaks of the Togakushi mountain range. Look closely and you may see the entrance to a small cave high on the cliffside. This is one of many grottos where monks once lived in isolation and practiced Buddhist austerities.

Winter

For sweeping views of the winter landscape, travel to one of the park's many ski areas, where the high, open stretches of mountainside offer vistas of distant peaks and snow-covered valleys.

Venturing out on snowshoes or cross-country skis is an invigorating way to see the forest in winter, when obscuring undergrowth has died back and the landscape is bare and open. The hushed wilderness and unbroken snowscape give winter visitors an entirely different experience.