

A Tale of Two Birches

Birch trees are a common sight in cool, northern climates around the world. Two birch species are most prominent in the Northern Japanese Alps: the white birch, called *shirakaba* (*Betula platyphylla*), and Erman's birch, called *dakekanba* (*Betula ermanii*). The birches serve as a natural altimeter, since the elevations each inhabits only barely overlap. Visitors traveling the winding forest road to the top of Mt. Norikura can spot the distinctive, pale-gray trunks of white birches up to elevations around 1,500 meters. From there, they are gradually replaced by the pinkish-brown trunks of Erman's birch, which grows from 1,500 meters to 2,500 meters.

Up close, other features distinguish the two species. Besides the difference in bark color, their leaves are also distinctively shaped. White birch leaves are triangular and flat-bottomed, with five to eight pairs of veins. Erman's birch leaves are more elongated and spade-shaped, with seven to twelve pairs of veins. On white birches, tree branches extend diagonally upward from the trunk, while Erman's birch branches sprout at roughly 90-degree angles. Both species have bark that peels off like paper, but mature Erman's birches show significantly more peeling.

White birch trees have special associations in Japanese culture. While cherry blossoms symbolize new life, sometimes tinged with the sadness of impermanence, and brilliant red maples evoke the fiery, transient beauty of autumn, white birches conjure images of highland recreation. Historically associated with upscale mountain resort towns, the birch brings to mind post-World War II days, when outdoor leisure pursuits in the mountains became popular with the general public.