

Above the Timberline

At 2,500 meters, plant life on Mt. Norikura undergoes a dramatic shift. Above this elevation, there are no more trees; instead, windswept thickets of shrub-like Siberian dwarf pine cover the mountain's heights. This point of transition is called the "timberline," and when seen from a distance, it stretches across the mountain face in a clear line. Above the timberline, the alpine world begins.

Alpine plants and animals have adapted to extreme conditions. Fierce winds and increased exposure to sunlight make it a dry environment. Water is scarce. Certain plants have evolved to conserve moisture by tightly curling their leaves. Others, like the Siberian dwarf pine, have slow growth rates and grow only a few centimeters a year. Still others—particularly small flowering species—burst into life as soon as the snow melts, compelled to make the most of a short growing season. One week, snow still blankets the ground; by the next, the rocky earth is covered in flowers.

Melting snow collects in craters between the various peaks of Mt. Norikura, and many alpine flowers cluster in these wetter areas. Insects and other pollinators thrive on their pollen, and birds fly up from lower altitudes to feed on the insects. The alpine zone's most famous avian resident, the rock ptarmigan, is a year-round inhabitant. Rock ptarmigans (*raichō*) shelter and feed under the thick layer of Siberian dwarf pines, where hardy alpine mosses cling to the bare stones.

Buses traveling to the summit of Mt. Norikura reach the timberline about 30 minutes after departing.