

Alpine Animals of Mt. Norikura

The high mountain slopes of Mt. Norikura teem with mammals, birds, and insects that have adapted to survive at high altitude. Most celebrated is the protected rock ptarmigan (*raichō*), but there are dozens of alpine species to admire.

The rock ptarmigan is the prefectural bird of both Gifu and Nagano Prefectures. These largely ground-dwelling birds rely on ground cover and camouflage for defense, changing plumage with the seasons. In spring, male birds are easier to spot than females. Their upper half is splotched gray, brown, and black, while their belly and wings are white; they also sport a red comb. Females in summer plumage are almost entirely a mottled brown. In winter, both sexes turn white apart from a black eye stripe and outer tail feathers. Males give an unusual croaking call.

The brown-and-white spotted nutcracker (*hoshigarasu*) depends heavily on shrub-like Siberian dwarf pines for food. The bird has a throat sack below its bill that can carry up to 200 pine seeds at once, allowing it to forage at length before returning to feed its young. The bird hides food across the mountain in places that it can later detect with 70 to 80 percent accuracy. The seeds that it misses germinate and grow, giving it the nickname “dwarf pine planter.”

Japan’s smallest bird is the goldcrest (*kikuitadaki*), which has white around its eyes and a striking yellow crest that is brightest in males; they raise the crest when disturbed or when seeking a mate. Though it weighs only about 5 grams, it can survive in this harsh climate.

Other species to seek out are the shy Japanese accentor (*kayakuguri*), which hides in the dwarf pines, and its lookalike, the yellow-billed alpine accentor (*iwahibari*), a gregarious bird that is little bothered by the presence of humans.

Mammals on Mt. Norikura include the ermine (*okojo*), which is brown with a white belly in spring, but turns entirely white in winter except for a tiny black spot on the tip of its tail. Asiatic black bears (*tsuki no waguma*) are also frequently spotted, and lodgings on Mt. Norikura often post charts with recent bear sightings. If you encounter a bear, keep a distance of at least 100 meters and be sure to avoid flash photography, which could prompt an attack.