

Yamamotoyama Highland

Yamamotoyama Highland is the gateway for nature-related activities in the area, from camping and hiking to snowshoeing and wildlife watching. The highland lies along the migratory route of a large number of eagles and hawk species, and attracts birdwatchers from September to November. Viewpoints afford beautiful panoramas of the surrounding plains, rivers, and mountains, and are places where visitors can observe the area's unusual natural phenomena, such as the halo-like Brocken spectre of an observer.

Relax in the outdoors

Yamamotoyama is accessible by car and has a number of observatories and facilities where visitors can enjoy nature. A community center located midway up the road to the Yamamotoyama Observatory has a campground where visitors can rent barbecue and camping equipment (advance reservations required for some equipment). The Ojaru Exhibition Hall, adjacent to the campground, features interactive displays explaining how hydroelectric energy from the nearby Shinano River powers the JR East railway lines.

The observatory is located at 336 meters and offers expansive views of Ojiya City, the Shinano River, the Aizu mountain range, and Mt. Echigo-Komagatake (2,003 m). The mountaintop cafe next to the viewing platform serves fare made with locally grown ingredients. Camping is available on the grassy field next to the cafe.

Bird-watching

Yamamotoyama is located along the migratory route of several birds of prey. From mid-September to early November, bird-watchers frequent the summit to spot raptors such as the grey-faced buzzard, oriental honey buzzard, Eurasian sparrowhawk, and peregrine falcon. It is sometimes possible to see as many as 500 birds in a single day. The best chance of seeing them is on sunny mornings just after a rainy day (from around 9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.). Other birds that migrate to the area include the warbling white-eye, with its olive-green plumage, and the grey-streaked flycatcher.

Other flora and fauna

The fields of Yamamotoyama bloom with colorful flowers throughout spring and summer. Rapeseed flowers and sunflowers are planted in rotation at Yamamotoyama Takusan Pocket Park. Rapeseed flowers bloom around mid-May, and sunflowers bloom

in early August. Visitors can spot diverse wild flora around the highland, such as the purple-hued Asian fawnlily in spring. The bright-pink fringed galax blooms in spring and early summer. Delicate white buckwheat flowers bloom in late summer. Animals such as the Japanese serow and red fox inhabit the area's dense forests.

Natural phenomena

Two large rivers, the Shinano and Uono rivers, intersect at the east side of the highland. Natural phenomena such as *unkai* (a sea of clouds), Brocken spectres, and fog bows (white rainbows) sometimes occur due to large amounts of mist rising from the rivers. A Brocken spectre is a rainbow-colored halo that appears around one's shadow when it is cast upon clouds or fog. A white rainbow is a luminous arch that appears in the fog or mist. Early autumn mornings are best for observing these phenomena.

Outdoor activities

Outdoor enthusiasts can enjoy a range of recreational activities such as hiking and camping. The city lights do not reach the south side of Yamamotoyama, making it a great spot for stargazing. In winter, visitors can explore the area with snowshoes.