

Okubo Pond and *Mizubasho*

Okubo Pond is located approximately 3 kilometers uphill in the direction of Mt. Haku from the village of Ogimachi, and sits 718 meters above sea level. The pond is thought to have been formed when a landslide blocked a small river that flowed through the valley. Streams from the southern slopes that once fed the river now empty into the pond, which also has a number of underwater springs. The pond is 50 to 130 centimeters deep and is almost entirely covered by marshland, which provides a habitat for various plants and animals rarely seen elsewhere in the Shirakawa area.

The most famous of these species is *mizubasho* (swamp lantern; *Lysichiton camtschatcensis*), which grows in large colonies mainly at the pond's far end and whose white lily-like flowers bloom immediately after the snow melts, usually from late April to early May. The *mizubasho* of Okubo Pond are designated a Natural Monument of the village of Shirakawa and attract a steady stream of plant enthusiasts every spring.

Other notable plants in the pond include *katakuri* (Asian fawn lily; *Erythronium japonicum*), whose purple and pink blooms follow those of the *mizubasho*, and *zazenso* (Eastern skunk cabbage; *Symplocarpus foetidus*), which produces distinctive purple-hued flower sheaths that often emerge while there is still snow on the ground. The shape of these sheaths is said to resemble a Buddhist monk engaged in zazen, or seated meditation, hence the name *zazenso* ("zazen plant").

Also native to the pond are creatures like the yellow-and-white-striped Gifu butterfly (*Luehdorfia japonica*), which can be seen fluttering around the area from May, more than a dozen species of dragonfly, and fish such as carp and *iwana* (whitespotted char), an East Asian species of trout.