

## **Moss Forests**

Moss carpets the forests around Lake Shikaribetsu and grows on the windhole-dotted rocky slopes in the area. Moss helps to soak up rainfall, maintain moisture in the soil, and keep the surrounding environment humid, enabling other plants to thrive. It also insulates windholes, slowing the thawing process of ice in spring and summer and offering some warmth to wildlife in autumn and winter.

In Shikaribetsu, moss species not commonly found together, such as subalpine and sphagnum varieties, grow in proximity. Such species grow in particular abundance around windholes, where the air is moist.

### *Distinctive moss species*

More than 1,600 of the world's 10,000-plus moss species have been identified in Japan, and many grow in Tokachi Shikaoi Geopark. Distinctive species in the park include apple moss, ostrich-plume feather moss, and goblin's gold, as well as several sphagnum varieties. Apple moss is a grass-like moss with stems several centimeters long, capped with apple-shaped spore cases, or capsules. The ostrich-plume feather moss has feathery, frond-like stems. This species grows in alpine areas throughout Japan and can be found near windholes in Shikaribetsu. Goblin's gold is a luminous moss that grows in dark environments including small spaces between rocks, inside windholes, and tree hollows. It glows a vivid green color in the shadows.

Sphagnum moss, or peat moss, requires a damp environment and is extremely common in wetlands. It can also be found in conifer forests and moist tundra areas. Six sphagnum species have been identified in the mountains of Shikaribetsu. These include small red peat moss, which grows so tightly together that colonies resemble broccoli florets, and five-ranked Bog-moss, with leaf-tip clusters that look like five-pointed stars. Five-ranked Bog-moss can be green with tinges of red or red all over.

The Lake Shikaribetsu area is designated a precious moss forest by the Bryological Society of Japan.