

Birds in Kikuchi Gorge

More than 60 species of birds live in or visit Kikuchi Gorge throughout the year—a diversity made possible by the proximity of thriving forest and river ecosystems in the gorge. Many of the species avoid humans and stick to areas where few hikers tread. But casual observers can still catch a glimpse of the local birdlife and, especially in summer, hear the singing of several distinctive winged visitors.

Common birds living in trees around the Kikuchi River year-round include the **yamagara tit**, distinguished by its gray back and wings, chestnut-colored belly, and black and white head; the **shujukara tit**, which has a yellow-green back, blueish-gray wings, and a black head with white cheeks; and the light-brown and gray stubby-billed **enaga** or **long-tailed tit**. Often seen close to the water are the **gray wagtail** (*kisekirei*), whose back is gray and belly a bright lemon yellow, and the black and white **crested kingfisher** (*yamasei*), which grows up to 40 centimeters long and sports a prominent spiky crest on its head. The upper end of the gorge is the domain of the **mountain hawk-eagle** (*kumataka*), an imposing dark-brown raptor with a wingspan of up to 175 centimeters. This apex predator's presence indicates a healthy ecosystem with a well-developed food chain.

These permanent residents are joined by a variety of migratory birds in late spring and summer, when the song of the vividly colored **blue-and-white flycatcher** (*oruri*), traveling from Southeast Asia, can be heard throughout the gorge. This species has been celebrated for its fluid, melodic song and kept as a pet at least since the Edo period (1603–1867), when it came to be considered one of Japan's "three great singing birds," along with the Japanese bush warbler (*uguisu*) and the *komadori* robin. A larger songbird that also journeys to Kikuchi Gorge in summer is the **lesser cuckoo** (*hototogisu*), evoked by poets for more than a millennium for its cry—a brief, four-part repeating phrase of "kwer-kwah-kwah-kurh."

The gorge is much quieter in winter, when the **pale thrush** (*shirohara*), brown on the back and whitish on the belly with a gray and yellow bill, can be seen traversing the forest floor, picking through the fallen leaves in search of food. The **copper pheasant** (*yamadori*) may also be glimpsed between the bare trees. This elegant long-tailed bird, named for its shiny brown plumage, is found only in Japan. The male is distinguished by its yellow bill and red face, while the female is smaller, with grayish-brown plumage.