

## **Amami-Oshima Natural World Heritage Site**

Amami-Oshima is the northernmost of the four islands in the Ryukyu chain that have been designated part of the Natural World Heritage Site. The island covers some 712 square kilometers and is largely mountainous. The irregular contour of its coastline consists of a series of rias, inlets that were created when the land rose and then settled, with the sea inundating the river valleys. The coast is surrounded by a mix of fringing reefs that grow outward from the shore and barrier reefs that form farther away, creating lagoons full of life.

### *A subtropical climate*

The warm waters of the Kuroshio current, which flows northeastward from the east coast of the Philippines, contribute to Amami-Oshima's subtropical oceanic climate, as do the seasonal monsoons. It is warm and humid year-round, with an average temperature of 21.8°C. The annual rainfall can reach 2,900 millimeters, most of it occurring during the rainy season from mid-May to late June and the typhoon season from July to October.

### *Rare animal species*

The animal life found on the island is abundant and varied—and rare. Many of the species are endemic, meaning they are not only native to a certain area, but can only be found there. Of the 13 varieties of terrestrial mammals on Amami Oshima, 8 are endemic species, as are 10 of the 16 species of reptiles and 9 of the 10 species of amphibians. Of the 315 species of birds reported on the island, 2 are endemic species and 10 are endemic subspecies. The large number of endemic species is a result of the separation of the island from the Eurasian mainland millions of years ago. The Amami rabbit is the best-known example: genetic studies show that it diverged from its relatives on the Eurasian continent some 9 million years ago.

### *A lush cover of vegetation*

Broadleaf forests, 80 percent of which are chinquapin oaks (a type of beech), blanket the mountains. The forest floor is the habitat of endemic and rare species of wild ginger, colorful orchids, ferns large and small, berries, and numerous other plants. The mangrove forest at the mouth of the Sumiyo River has diverse vegetation that gradually changes depending on the tides and the salinity of the swampy soil. Most of the flat arable land is found in the northernmost part of the island.

### *Island traditions*

Amami-Oshima's culture and social structure have been heavily influenced by the natural environment. The mountainous interior hindered transportation, so villages developed on the coastal inlets, and were only connected by sea routes. Religious beliefs center around gods from the mountains and distant seas who are thought to communicate with village priestesses (*noro*). The islanders have always had to rely almost entirely on nearby natural resources, and an awareness of the importance of conservation is still part of their lifestyle.