

The Forest at the River's Source

For more than 500 years, a forest has stood untouched at the headwaters of the Yoshino River, where the river's flow is little more than a web of brooks and streams. There, rain and snowmelt from the mountains run down between great, mossy boulders, forming ever-larger cascades of pure mountain water that are crucial to the entire river ecosystem. Between 1999 and 2002, the town of Kawakami purchased 740 hectares of this vital forest to safeguard it from human intrusion.

Spanning elevations from 470 to 1,099 meters, the forest is a mix of Japanese beech, horse chestnut, *himeshara* (*Stewartia monadelphica*), and over 390 other species of trees and shrubs. Animals including the Japanese serow, Odaigahara salamander, and Japanese stream toad inhabit the wood, together with the tiny gossamer-winged butterfly *Celastrina sugitanii*, whose habitat is rapidly disappearing elsewhere.

In addition to nurturing plant and animal life, the forest is essential to regulating the Yoshino River's water level. In times of excessive rain, the trees and soil absorb water, preventing flooding downhill. In times of drought, the trees retain enough moisture in the soil to keep the river flowing and to sustain the surrounding plants and animals.

To protect the vital forest, entry is limited to guided tours. To participate, those interested can contact the Forest and Riverhead Museum Genryūkan.