

Ice Age Wildlife

Life forms that time forgot

Much of the topography of the Minami Alps was formed by the action of glaciers in the last Ice Age, 20,000 years ago. For the same reason, the mountains are home to many arctic species—animals and plants that expanded their habitats southward during the Ice Age, then stayed behind in the mountains' alpine zone even after the climate turned temperate.

The most famous of these relict species is the rock ptarmigan (*raicho* or “thunder bird” in Japanese, so called because it comes out during storms). Bigger than a pigeon and smaller than a chicken, the rock ptarmigan is a protected species in Japan. Its southernmost occurrence in the northern hemisphere is on Mt. Tekaridake, the peak at the south end of Minami Alps National Park. A sedentary bird that needs all the protection it can get, the rock ptarmigan is a master of camouflage, or apatetic coloration. From

spring to autumn, its mottled plumage enables it to blend in with the rocky environment, but it turns white in winter, making it invisible in the snow.

Many arctic species can be found among the alpine flowers of the Minami Alps. Three white-petaled flowers of note are the *Kitadake-so* (literally “Kitadake plant,” *Callianthemum hondoense*); the drooping saxifrage (*Saxifraga cernua*), found throughout the High Arctic; and the eight-petal mountain avens (*Dryas octopetala*). The apetalous catchfly (*Silene uralensis*) has a distinctive white-and-green-striped calyx, which flies use as an incubator because of the warmth and protection it offers.