

Shirane Sanzan

Three white peaks

Mt. Kitadake is the most northerly—*kita* means “north”—of a series of peaks collectively known as Shirane Sanzan, or “Three White-Topped Mountains.” Moving south, the other two in the trio are Mt. Ainodake (literally the “in-between mountain”) and Mt. Notoridake (“farm-bird mountain”). Kitadake (3,193 m) and Ainodake (3,190) are Japan’s second and third tallest mountains, with Notoridake not far behind at over 3,000 meters.

Notoridake gets its name from a bird-shaped patch of snow on its eastern flank that lingers after the spring thaw. Traditionally, its appearance was taken as a sign by farmers to start planting the year’s rice crop.

Ainodake has two of the amphitheater-like hollows at high elevations known as cirques: the Hosozawa cirque on the east flank and the Kitazawa

cirque on the northeast. The mountain is thought to have been dozens of meters taller than it is now before the original peak collapsed, an event that accounts for its broad, expansive summit.

Hiking the entire Shirane Sanzan, starting at Hirogawara and finishing at Narada, can be done in a strenuous two days or a more leisurely three.