

Ho-o Sanzan

The phoenix mountains

Ho-o Sanzan, a series of three mountain peaks, lies around 5 kilometers northeast of Mt. Kitadake. Going from north to south, these are Mt. Jizodake (2,764 m), Mt. Kannondake (2,841 m), and Mt. Yakushidake (2,780 m). At first glance, the three peaks seem to be covered in snow year-round—but in fact, the mountaintops are made of pale granite.

Ho-o is the Japanese word for phoenix. According to East Asian tradition, the phoenix is a sacred bird that appears in times of peace, prosperity, and good government, and vanishes in times of trouble. Appropriately enough, all three peaks have religious names: Jizo is a bodhisattva associated with protecting children and travelers, Kannon is the bodhisattva of compassion, and Yakushi is the buddha of healing and medicine.

The summit of Jizodake is a dramatic 20-meter-tall rock spire commonly called the Obelisk. The first person known to have climbed it is the Reverend Walter Weston (1861–1940), an Anglican missionary and enthusiastic alpinist from Great Britain. Weston published *Mountaineering and Exploring in the Japanese Alps*, a book about his climbing adventures, in 1896. Until Weston came along, people in Japan had rarely ventured into the mountains except for practical purposes like cutting down trees or for religious training. For that reason, Weston is regarded as the father of modern recreational mountaineering in Japan.