

## **Yambaru National Park**

Yambaru National Park was established on September 15, 2016, making it one of the newest of Japan's 35 national parks. Occupying 21,022 hectares at the north end of Okinawa Island, the park features heavily forested mountains, rugged cliffs and porous karst topography near Cape Hedo, and a mangrove forest at the mouth of the Gesashi River. The subtropical forest found here is unusual at this latitude (close to 27 degrees N), which Yambaru shares with more arid regions like northern Mexico, the Libyan desert, and northwestern India. Thanks to seasonal winds and the warm waters of the Kuroshio Current, the area enjoys abundant rainfall that supports a diverse range of plant life, from the towering chinkapin trees known as *itajii* (*Castanopsis sieboldii*) to large ferns and small, very rare orchids.

Yambaru is home to diverse animal species, many of which are endemic due to the island's long history of isolation from the Asian continent and

Japan's main islands. Despite covering less than 0.1 percent of Japan's total area, Yambaru is the habitat of about half of Japan's bird species and a quarter of its frog species. Some of the endangered species, such as the Okinawa rail (Japan's only flightless bird) and the Okinawa woodpecker, are currently protected to allow their populations to recover.

The natural environment of the surrounding land and sea has always been an important source of materials for Yambaru villagers. For example, the forests have historically provided firewood, charcoal, and timber, both for

local use and for trading with other areas of Okinawa Island. The Yambaru region went through a period of over-utilization, but recent efforts by local residents now use the forests' resources more sustainably. Communities continue to work together to conserve wildlife and prevent the introduction of invasive species.

Yambaru National Park offers visitors a chance to experience and interact with the region's unique natural environment and vibrant culture through

tours, trekking, canyoning, kayaking, animal watching, and other activities.