

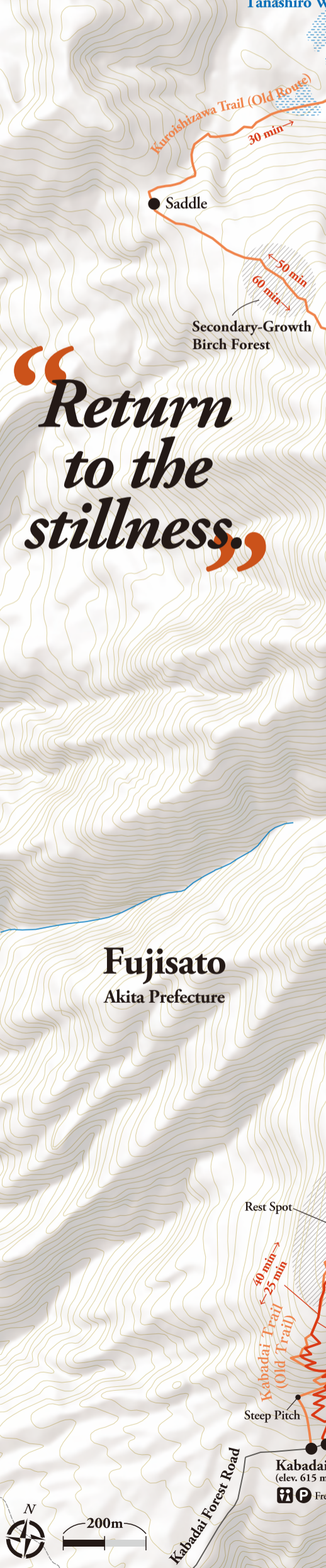
Explore Fujisato - 2

Where the spirit of the forest dwells

【Mt. Fujisato Komagatake】

Difficulty: **2** (on a scale of 1 to 10)
 Terrain: **B** (on a scale of A to E)

Mt. Fujisato Komagatake's several hiking trails are great for day hikes. The Kuroishizawa Trail gives easiest access to and from the mountain's peak, while visitors with rugged vehicles may enjoy the longer, more secluded Kabadai Trail to the south. The Kabadai Trail meets the Kuroishizawa Trail at the mountain's summit, so—with prior transportation arrangements—the two trails can be combined into a single 4-hour hike from trailhead to trailhead.



“Return to the stillness.”

Climbing Mt. Komagatake

You can reach the summit of Mt. Fujisato Komagatake either from the north, via the Kuroishizawa Trail, or from the south along the Kabadai Trail.

The Kuroishizawa Trailhead can be reached with a 50-minute drive along a paved road from the Shirakami Sanchi World Heritage Conservation Center in Fujisato. The trail divides into the Old Route and the New Route, creating a loop to that leads to and from the summit.

Access to the southern Kabadai Trail is limited to hikers with vehicles that can handle the rocky, unpaved roads. As a result, the Kabadai Trail offers a more solitary, meditative experience of the deep beech forest. To reach it, take the gravel road that leads from the Conservation

Center toward Mt. Kodake. After roughly an hour, turn right at the informational sign and continue for 5 minutes to reach the Kabadai Trailhead.

Because the Kuroishizawa and Kabadai Trails meet on the mountain's summit, hikers can also connect them by ascending the mountain along one trail and taking the other down the mountain's opposite face. (In this case, prior transportation arrangements are necessary. Be sure to arrange a drop-off and pickup, or else leave vehicles parked at both trailheads.)

These different routes highlight the range of forest types that make Mt. Fujisato Komagatake a rich and fascinating environment. In addition to pristine beech forest, there are areas where the beeches were cleared and Japanese cedars planted in their stead; in other places, those cedars are slowly being overtaken by pale-limbed Erman's birches. These intermingled generations keenly convey the weight of countless years in the living forest around you.



Komagatake's Stunning View

Shirakami wilderness as far as the eye can see

Hikers ascending along the Kuroishizawa Trail will reach a junction where the Old and New Routes reconverge a short distance from the summit of Mt. Fujisato Komagatake. From here to the mountain's peak, the whole of Shirakami Sanchi's mountain wilderness is visible in a breathtaking panorama that extends in all directions. On clear days, the view stretches south to Mt. Chōkai, on the border of Yamagata Prefecture, and northwest to the Tsugaru Straits, in the Sea of Japan. You may even see as far as the Oshima Peninsula on the southwestern tip of Hokkaido.

There is a flat, open area on the summit—perfect for a leisurely lunch eaten in the splendor of this majestic landscape.



On the horizon, renowned Mt. Iwaki

Between Mt. Maedake and the summit of Mt. Fujisato Komagatake, the Kabadai Trail presents an excellent vantage of the regional landscape. To the southeast lies Mt. Hachimandai, a 1,614-meter peak that stands on the border of Akita and Iwate Prefectures. Due east, you can see Mt. Tashirodake (1,178 m), which marks the easternmost edge of the Shirakami Sanchi mountains. On the distant northern horizon stands Mt. Iwaki, an imposing, 1,625-meter stratovolcano whose conical shape has been likened to that of Mt. Fuji. It is the tallest mountain in Aomori Prefecture, visible from anywhere on the Tsugaru Plain. The volcano's last eruption—a minor release of pressurized steam—occurred in 1863.

Choose Your Route



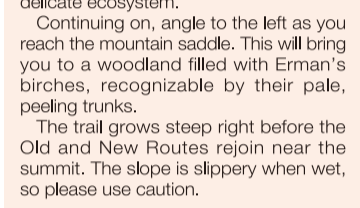
Route 1 Kuroishizawa Trail: Old Route

The Kuroishizawa Trail begins at the parking lot north of Mt. Fujisato Komagatake. After the first 100 meters, the trail enters into pristine beech forest. From there, it takes about 10 minutes to reach the junction of the Old and New Routes.

Taking a right at the fork will put you on the Old Route, which travels through the three highland marshes that make up the Tanashiro Wetland—19 hectares of blooming mountain wilderness with a very delicate ecosystem.

Continuing on, angle to the left as you reach the mountain saddle. This will bring you to a woodland filled with Erman's birches, recognizable by their pale, peeling trunks.

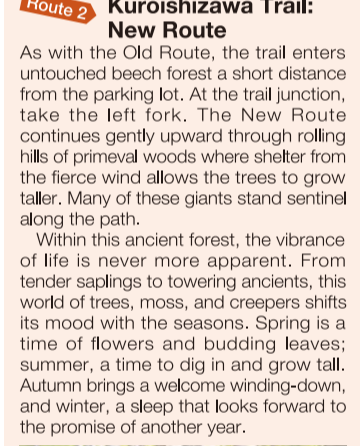
The trail grows steep right before the Old and New Routes rejoin near the summit. The slope is slippery when wet, so please use caution.



Route 2 Kuroishizawa Trail: New Route

As with the Old Route, the trail enters untouched beech forest a short distance from the parking lot. At the trail junction, take the left fork. The New Route continues gently upward through rolling hills of primeval woods where shelter from the fierce wind allows the trees to grow taller. Many of these giants stand sentinel along the path.

Within this ancient forest, the vibrance of life is never more apparent. From tender saplings to towering ancients, this world of trees, moss, and creepers shifts its mood with the seasons. Spring is a time of flowers and budding leaves; summer, a time to dig in and grow tall. Autumn brings a welcome winding-down, and winter, a sleep that looks forward to the promise of another year.



Route 3 Kabadai Trail

The Kabadai Trail consists of two routes—the Old Trail and the New Trail, which was completed in September 2018. The New Trail is the recommended option, as it avoids a steep stretch along the Old Trail and carries you through some of the most impressive primeval beech forest on the mountain.

The beech forest begins very close to the trailhead, and the trail soon enters a plateau with trees even taller and grander than those along the Kuroishizawa Trail. In places where these giants have fallen, saplings are already sprouting in their place, continuing the forest's constant cycle of self-renewal.

Eventually the Kabadai Trail reaches the top of Mt. Maedake. From here to the summit of Mt. Fujisato Komagatake, the trail follows the ridgeline and gives a spectacular view on both sides. Just before the end, the trail has a last, thrilling challenge: a fixed-rope climb up the final slope.

Ask the Guides

“I never knew a mountain could hold such a lush, mossy world.”

In 2011, I started my hiking career on the Old Route of the Kuroishizawa Trail. I set out with my two kids (then five and eleven years old), and we were amazed by the world of moss-covered boulders that looked straight out of a Studio Ghibli film. It felt so pure and untouched!

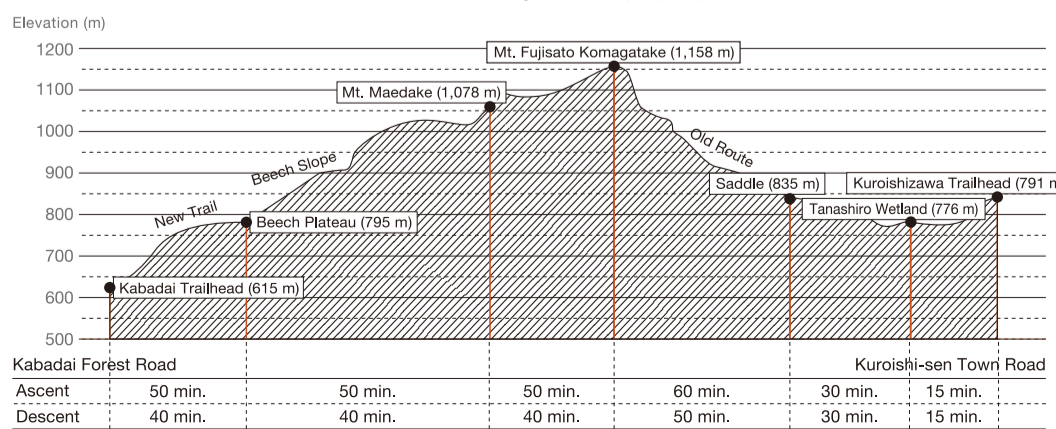


“On the way down, you can enjoy the forest without constantly watching your feet.”

If you're comfortable climbing a short stretch of steep trail, I recommend taking the Kuroishizawa Trail's Old Route up the mountain and the New Route coming down. The gentle grade of the New Route makes it easy to stroll without worrying about your footing, which lets you enjoy the greenery or autumn colors all around you.



Route Profile



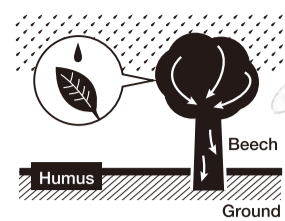
Trail times are approximate; they represent the average hiking speed of an adult on a clear day. For an explanation of Difficulty and Terrain rankings, search the web for "Akita's Mountains Are Here to Climb!"



Shirakami Sanchi : A Land Nurtured by Beeches

Due to their structure, beech trees are unparalleled collectors of rainwater. The tips of their leaves tilt slightly upward so that water runs down along their veins and toward the branches. The branches transmit water quickly to the trunk, where it runs down the tree's smooth bark without obstruction. On rainy days, you can clearly see channels of water running down the trunk, and these flows leave traces that are visible even on sunny days. A tree's capacity to channel water down its trunk and into the earth is called "stemflow."

The earthy layer of the forest floor that receives this water is called humus. Humus is formed from fallen leaves—in this case, beech leaves—which are broken down by insects and microorganisms over a period of six to seven years. This decomposition is very thorough; a hundred years of leaves produce a layer of humus that is only 10 centimeters thick.



Beech trees rapidly funnel rainwater down their trunks and into the ground, where it is absorbed into the humus layer formed by fallen leaves. A single 200-year-old beech tree can hold 8 metric tons of water!



Ghost pipe is a fascinating plant that does not produce chlorophyll or get its energy through photosynthesis. Instead, it obtains nutrients through a symbiotic relationship with fungi living in the soil of the forest floor.

Shirakami's Flowering Alpine Landscape

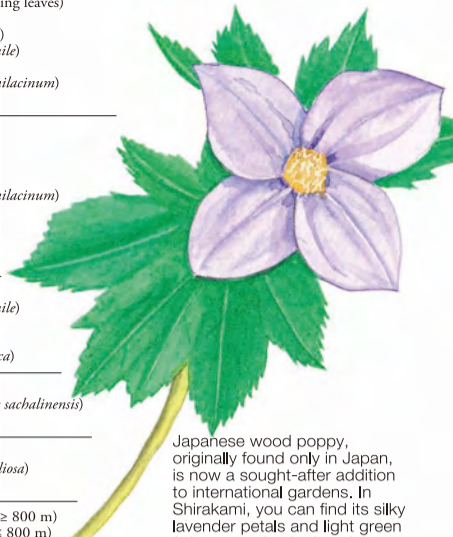
Many alpine plants in Japan are said to be survivors of the last Ice Age—species that once covered much more of the land, but now only survive in the chilly temperatures at high altitude.

Shirakami Sanchi's roughly 1,000-meter elevations are a bit low to be ideal, but some alpine species do make their homes on the mountaintops. The ridgeline portion of the Kabadaï Trail (between Mt. Maedake and the summit of Mt. Fujisato Komagatake) is one such alpine refuge. There, the cheery white flowers of bunchberry dogwood and lavender blooms of Japanese wood poppy appear along the trail.

Even with relatively few alpine species, Shirakami Sanchi holds a wealth of other flowers and trees that bring life to every season. Hiring a guide is one way to learn about this environment in greater depth, and to see rare species you might never notice on your own.

Blooming Season

May	Japanese Beech (blossoms and spring leaves) Willow-leaf Magnolia Trailing Arbutus (<i>Epigaea asiatica</i>) Ghost Pipe (<i>Monotropastrum bumile</i>) Spicebush Japanese Fairy Bells (<i>Disporum smilacinum</i>) Japanese Whitebark Magnolia
June	Japanese Horse Chestnut Rhododendron brachycarpum Fringed Galax Japanese Wood Poppy Japanese Fairy Bells (<i>Disporum smilacinum</i>) Small Twistedstalk Japanese Alpine Cherry Wood Sorrel Albrecht's Azalea
July	<i>Rhododendron multiflorum</i> Ghost Pipe (<i>Monotropastrum bumile</i>) <i>Rhododendron brachycarpum</i> Climbing Hydrangea Terrestrial Orchid (<i>Yoonia japonica</i>)
August	Panicum Hydrangea Terrestrial Orchid (<i>Ephippianthus sachalinensis</i>) Japanese Clethra
September	Marsh Grass of Parnassus Rattlesnake Plantain (<i>Goodyera foliosa</i>) East Asian Goldenrod
October	Early Yellow Beech Foliage (elev. ≥ 800 m) Late Yellow Beech Foliage (elev. < 800 m)



Japanese wood poppy, originally found only in Japan, is now a sought-after addition to international gardens. In Shirakami, you can find its silky lavender petals and light green foliage growing in the wild.

Protected by Residents, Declared World Heritage

Heirs to Ecological Abundance

On December 11, 1993, Shirakami Sanchi—along with Yakushima Island in Kagoshima Prefecture—became the first place in Japan to receive designation as a UNESCO World Natural Heritage site. The mountainous wilderness broadly referred to as Shirakami Sanchi covers more than 130,000 hectares, but 16,971 hectares from within this region were selected as containing the largest primeval beech forest in East Asia. Spread across the divide between Aomori and Akita Prefectures, the heritage site includes a core zone (kept free of human interference and left to nature) and a buffer zone (which helps to shelter the core zone from human impact).

Shirakami Sanchi's beech forests have remained largely untouched for over 8,000 years. Similar beech forests once

covered much of the country, but today they are extremely rare. This precious ecosystem preserves more than 500 plant species, large mammals like bears and serow, and 94 species of birds—including rare black woodpeckers and huge golden eagles.

Before its registration as a world heritage site, the forests of Shirakami were a familiar backyard to residents. Then, in 1978, a plan arose to connect Akita and Aomori Prefectures by cutting a path straight through the wilderness—a plan referred to as the Seishū Forest Road Construction Project. Creation of this road threatened large areas of the beech forest.

Fortunately, forestry service employee Zenkichi Ichikawa and Fujisato resident Kōichi Kamata, who ran a local camera shop, led a campaign against the road construction. They collected support from across the country, and in 1990, eight

years after the start of construction, the project was terminated.

Three years after this success, the importance of Shirakami Sanchi's wilderness environment was formally recognized with the World Natural Heritage designation. It is thanks to these ongoing protection efforts that Shirakami Sanchi's priceless beech forests and rich ecosystem will survive for future generations.

8000 Year-Old Forest



The Japanese dormouse is another natural treasure. Less than half the size of a chipmunk, this tiny rodent can conserve energy by lowering its body temperature to near-freezing temperatures during winter hibernation.



Beech flowers are fuzzy, round blossoms that appear with the new spring leaves. Each tree has both male and female flowers.

“My Nature Advisor Keita Suganuma Favorite Birds”

The diversity of bird species in Shirakami Sanchi is incredible. As many as 94 different bird species are known to inhabit the World Heritage area. If you include the towns and villages just outside, more than 100 species make this region their home.

One unusual characteristic of Shirakami birdlife is the number of birds that nest in holes in trees, including mandarin ducks, owls, and Oriental dollarbirds. This is an indicator of a healthy, old-growth forest with many large trees.

Among the area's many birds, my top three are the crested kingfisher, the black woodpecker, and the mountain hawk-eagle. In spring, you can find crested kingfisher males making hopeful presents of their freshly caught fish to females. Black woodpeckers are so rare on Japan's central island (Honshu), they are often referred to as “phantom birds.” The mountain hawk-eagle, despite being the largest bird in its genus, soars and dives effortlessly through the tangle of trees.



Shirakami's Animal Life

Shirakami Sanchi's value as an ecosystem lies not only in its abundant plant life, but in the many animal species it shelters. Serow, black bears, and Japanese macaques are common mammalian residents of beech forests. Avians such as the black woodpecker—the largest woodpecker species in Japan and a familiar sight in Fujisato—join the reptiles, amphibians, and fish species like char and sweetfish that live here.

You can often see signs of these animals while hiking: bears mark their territory by gouging deep marks into trees with their claws, and fresh snow may reveal the tracks of rabbits or even a passing serow.



The Japanese serow is an agile cliff-climber. Although they resemble shaggy antelopes, they are more closely related to goats and sheep. Serow are designated as natural treasures and enjoy a protected status.



The bears that live in Shirakami Sanchi are Asian black bears, sometimes called “moon bears” for the crescent-shaped patch of white fur on their chests.

Becoming a World Heritage Forest

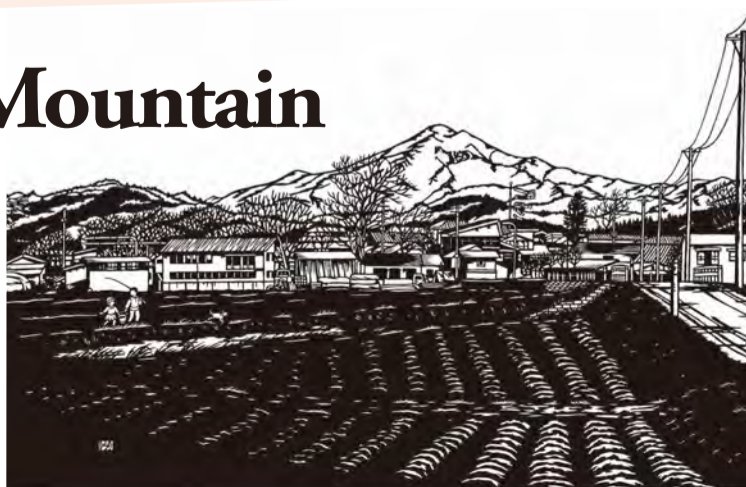


A Horse Gambols on the Mountain

Mt. Fujisato Komagatake is the highest peak in Fujisato, and a cherished symbol of the town. Its slopes are blanketed in snow from late autumn to early spring, but by early May, only a little remains. This is when a horse appears on the mountainside.

Greeted with great excitement by locals, this celebrated equine is an image formed each spring by lingering pockets of snow on the mountain. The name “Komagatake,” in fact, means “horse’s peak.” Until the 1950s, horses played an important role in tilling and preparing the fields for planting. In addition, the yearly arrival of the snow-horse coincides with the time for rice planting—and so the horse on Mt. Fujisato Komagatake has become symbolic of the spring planting season.

As the warming weather and longer days bring snowmelt rushing down from the Shirakami Sanchi mountains, the Fujikoto River swells. Its clear, clean waters are ideal for rice cultivation. Throughout this season, townsfolk feel the joy of spring each time they look up and see the horse on the mountain.



“Fujisato: Early Spring” by Shōji Hirano (1928–2011) (papercutting)

Explore Fujisato

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