



# Oze National Park guide book



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# Introducing Oze

Oze is the familiar name for the expansive area of mountains and marshland that makes up Oze National Park. It is located in the center of Japan's largest island of Honshu, and straddles four prefectures: Gunma, Fukushima, Niigata, and Tochigi.

Oze's natural environment shows little sign of human interference. Thanks to some of Japan's strongest environmental protection programs, the area's topography and wildlife have retained many physical and ecological characteristics that have developed over the millennia.

The marshlands of Oze, which are one of Japan's largest high moors, cover two basins, the western Ozegahara marsh and the Lake Ozenuma area to the east. The Ozegahara marsh covers an area 6 kilometers long and 2 kilometers wide, where the average altitude is 1,400 meters. Lake Ozenuma, which lies at an altitude of 1,660 meters, has a circumference of 9 kilometers. The plateau was formed after lava from volcanic eruptions some two million years ago created an independent depression. This gradually evolved into the peat moor that is now home to expansive fields of marsh plants, including a variety of colorful wildflowers.

The Ozegahara marsh is surrounded by mountains in the 2,000-meter range, with the highest, Mt. Hiuchi, reaching 2,356 meters. All but the peak of Mt. Shibutsu are volcanic in origin and covered in thick forest. Mt. Shibutsu's mineral makeup is less compatible with plant growth, so it has a lower tree line than the other peaks, giving hikers panoramic views of the marshes spreading out to the east.

There are no roads in the national park. The only entrances to the park are forest trails from several mountain passes that lead up to the surrounding mountain peaks or down to the marsh area. The Hatomachi-toge Pass on the Gunma Prefecture side of the park is the most popular entrance. The hiking trails in the mountains are clearly marked and well maintained, as are the protective boardwalks that crisscross the marshland. The routes are varied, from courses that can be covered on a day trip to longer routes that require staying overnight in the park.



Oze National Park is open from early May to late October. Even over this relatively short season, Oze shows many different faces, as the altitude and weather patterns result in constantly changing conditions. Watching the early morning fog over the peat moors slowly lift to reveal the silhouette of the surrounding mountains is an unforgettable experience. Rainbows occur often, and sunny days can quickly turn cloudy, and vice versa. Many visitors are enthusiastic photographers, who come to capture Oze in its many manifestations.

The park is closed in the winter due to massive amounts of snow and bitter cold temperatures that reach as low as  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Because of the high altitude, summer temperatures rarely reach  $30^{\circ}\text{C}$ , and nights can become quite chilly.

There are two Visitor Centers where knowledgeable staff are on hand to help guests learn about the park, its natural environment, animal life, and other characteristics. They can also help with practical and logistical advice about the mountain trails, boardwalk routes, and recommended clothing and equipment. There are three campsites and over 20 lodges around the park, offering accommodation, meals, and hot baths for hikers.

For many years, Oze has been the focus of preservation efforts by conservation activists, mountain lodge operators, park administrators, and, of course, visitors. The national park continues to protect the environment while sharing its natural beauty with visitors.



△ The View from the top of Mt. Shibutsu

## The Origins of Oze National Park

The Oze area was included in Nikko National Park in 1934, becoming part of Japan's fourth national park. However, the two areas are very different environmentally, so Oze National Park was established as an independent entity in August 2007. It expanded to include areas around Mt. Aizukoma and Mt. Tashiro, becoming Japan's twenty-ninth national park. Only 150 kilometers from Tokyo and right on the border of the Kanto and Tohoku regions, Oze is a popular destination for day visitors, campers, and hikers.

Oze National Park has long been at the forefront of conservation in Japan, thanks to public-led efforts that stopped the construction of electric power generation plants that would have flooded much of the area. Other initiatives included blocking road development into the park and launching programs against littering and other potential damage from tourism.

# The Four Seasons of Oze

The seasons in Oze are distinct, and many repeat visitors come at different times of the year in order to experience its seasonal highlights.

## Spring

Spring comes late in Oze, with the snow beginning to melt in early May. The Visitor Centers begin operations, and the mountain huts are dug out from under the snow and start accepting visitors. Late May to mid-June is the season of the mizubasho, or Asian skunk cabbage, which brightens the marshes with its white flowers, attracting large numbers of visitors. Later, marsh marigolds add their golden yellow hues to the landscape.



Mizubasho Asian skunk cabbage



Marsh-marigold

## Summer



The summer season is when the mountains are most accessible and the basins most verdant. In July the marshes turn white with the fluff of cottonsedge (*erriophorum*), then shift to bright yellow when the day lilies bloom later in the month. This is the peak of Oze's floral (and tourist) season. Hikers come to climb the many peaks and casual visitors come to enjoy the scenery from the boardwalks that traverse the marshes.



Day lily



Cottonsedge

## Autumn

The climate turns cooler in late August as autumn comes to Oze, and animals begin preparing for a long winter hibernation. The foliage begins to change color in September, when the marsh grasses and other vegetation turn to autumn gold. Later in the month, trees on the mountainsides like maple and beech turn bright red, yellow and brown. Snow begins to fall in October, and by November has accumulated into deep drifts, making the park largely inaccessible until spring.



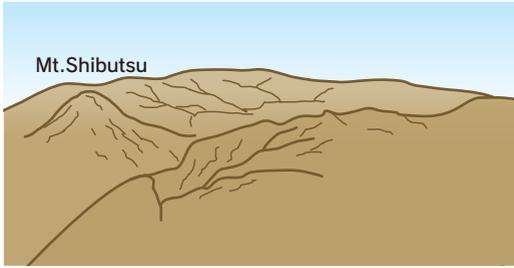
◀ Ezo rindo

## Winter



The snowfalls that begin in mid-October eventually turn all of Oze into deep snow country. The park staff and mountain huts prepare the facilities to survive the elements, then leave for the winter period. The snow layer, which can reach depths of 3 to 4 meters in parts of the park, plays a big part in maintaining the Oze's ecosystem, protecting the plants from the bitter winds of mid-winter and nourishing the growth of new sprouts as snowmelt in late spring.

# How Oze Evolved



The entire Oze area was a plateau until about two million years ago, when Mt. Shibutsu began forming from serpentine rock on the western edge of a shallow valley. Volcanic eruptions began to form other mountains nearby. The lava flow from these mountains was of low viscosity, creating broad and shallow shield-volcano formations, so called because they look like a warrior's shield laid on the ground face-up. As mountains surrounded the central plateau, Oze's landscape began to take on its present configuration.



Mt. Hiuchi was the last mountain in the area to erupt, beginning about 350,000 years ago, during the Pleistocene epoch. The lava flow from its western

slope changed the flow of existing rivers. Lake Ozenuma was formed around 10,000 years ago, when lava flow on the southern side, possibly aided by erosion from the mountain slopes, blocked the flow of the Nushiri River.

In later times, streams and rivers flowing down from the mountains deposited silt and other residue in the area now known as the Ozegahara marsh. The rivers frequently flooded or changed course, creating small, independent bog pools and wetlands where plants began to decompose, eventually creating the thick surface of peat that covers the plateau today.

## All About the Oze Marshland

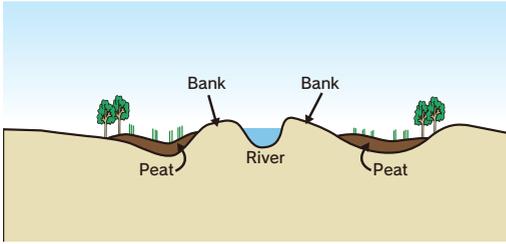
Peat forms when conditions such as cold temperatures and excessive humidity prevent dead vegetation from fully decomposing, leaving behind a greater amount of organic material. Oze has an average annual temperature of 4 ° C, about the same as the inside of a refrigerator, easily cold enough to inhibit the decaying process.

The partly decayed material builds up and condenses over many thousands of years, eventually turning into peat soil. The rate of peat growth in Oze is approximately 0.7 – 0.8

mm a year, although this can vary depending on the plants and the climate. If a hiker were to step off the boardwalk and make a 1-centimeter depression in the peat, it would take ten years for the marsh to recover. Researchers believe that it took 6,000 to 8,000 years for the moor's peat surface to reach its present thickness of 5 meters.

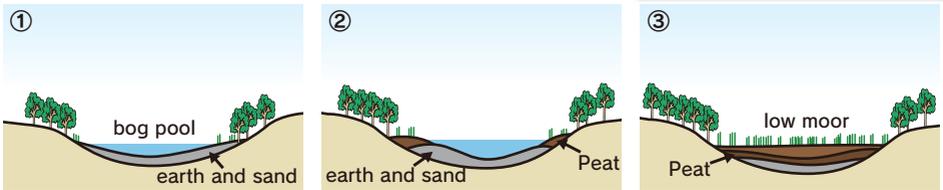


Peat



The plants that cover the Ozegahara marsh vary depending on the makeup of the vegetation under the surface and how the habitat was formed. There are over 1,800 bog pools, ranging from 2 to over 100 meters in diameter, with depths from around 10 centimeters to over 3 meters.

Most of the marshes of Ozegahara are the result of repeated flooding. Each time the rivers retreated, they left wetlands on both sides, separated by high banks. (See illustration.) These wetlands are an ideal habitat for reeds, grass-like sedges, and plants such as bogbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*). As these plants partially decompose, they form peat, filling in depressions and creating a flat surface.



The marshes near Lake Ozenuma developed differently, starting as bog pools that gradually filled with earth and sand as their banks eroded. This created a thriving environment for aquatic plants that also turned into peat as they decomposed. This type of marsh is called a “low moor,” as the surface is usually at the same level as the surrounding water table. The peat receives nourishment from the river water, which is vital to the fields of mizubasho (*Asian skunk cabbage*) that grow here.

bogbean ▲



## Oze and the Ramsar Convention

In November 2005, Oze was registered as a Ramsar Convention site, in recognition of its importance as a wetland habitat for migratory birds. The convention, named after the Iranian city where it was signed in 1971, is an international treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands, and covers rivers, lakes, paddies, reservoirs, sea coves, tidal flats, and mangrove forests. As of December 2019, there are 52 Ramsar sites in Japan and over 2,000 in the 170 countries that signed the agreement.



# Plant Life of Oze

The area's distinct topography, geography, and climate conditions have created several ecosystems that host over 900 plant species. Oze lies at the intersection of four distinct types of vegetation: Northern, Southern, Pacific, and Japan Sea varieties.

## Mountain Forests

The mountains surrounding Ozegahara are largely covered with deciduous trees, which vary depending on the altitude and the kind of soil. Japanese beech trees (*Fagus crenata*), with their off-white bark, are numerous in the Hatomachi-toge Pass area, for example, while the trail down to Yamanohana passes through forests of Japanese oak (*Quercus crispula*). At altitudes over 1,600 meters, coniferous trees such as Maries fir (*Abies mariesii*) and spruce (*Picea jezoensis subsp. hondoensis*) are more plentiful.



Very little light reaches the forest floor, and visitors with a keen eye may spot ginryoso (*Monotropastrum humile*), a plant with small white flowers that does not perform photosynthesis like other plants, instead getting its nutrients from fungi.

Mt. Shibutsu is not volcanic but largely made up of serpentinite, so named because of its snakeskin-like appearance. Due to the high magnesium and iron content of the rock, it is not conducive to the growth of many varieties of plants. One plant that manages to grow on Mt. Shibutsu is ozeso (*Japonolirion osense*), which takes its name from Oze. This, along with *Arenaria katoana* and *Leontopodium fauriei* var. *angustifolium* (see photos), are recognized as serpentinite-persistent plants.



▲ ginryoso



▲ *Leontopodium fauriei* var. *angustifolium*



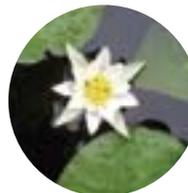
▲ Ozeso

## Marsh Plants

During the spring and summer months the marshes are carpeted with flowers. Mizubasho, or Asian skunk cabbage (*Lysichiton camtschatcense*) is the first to make its appearance, covering many parts of the marshes in white from late May to mid-June. What looks like a white blossom, however, is actually a leaf called a spathe. The bright yellow-orange daylily called Nikko kisuge (*Hemerocallis esculenta*) is also a perennial favorite for visitors, appearing in mid-July. As the English name implies, the flowers only bloom for one day. Delicate blossoms appear on the stems of the iwashobu (*Triantha japonica*), an alpine plant that is thought to date back to the Ice Age.

Other plants frequently seen in Oze include the spongy mizugoke (*bog moss*) that holds a lot of water, and cottonsedge (*Eriophorum vaginatum*) known as watasuge.

The pygmy water lily, or hitsujigusa (*Nymphaea tetragona*), is among the plants growing in the ponds and small lakes, along with Ozekohone (*Nuphar pumilum* var. *ozeense*), which has leaves like a lotus, but with yellow blossoms.



▲ hitsujigusa



▲ Ozekohone

# Animals of Oze

Oze is home to animal life as diverse as the range of habitats in the park, from the smallest dragonfly in Japan, with a body only 2 centimeters long and wing length of only 15 millimeters, to the Asian black bear, which can weigh up to 200 kilograms.

These animals play an important part in the area's ecology. For example, thanks to the seeds in their droppings, bears help plants grow over a large area. Research is being conducted on ways to keep visitors from encroaching on the bears' habitats.

Recent changes in climate have caused an increase in the number of deer in the park, something previously unheard of. The growing deer population can damage the marshes and change the ecology of the forests, so strategies for limiting their numbers are being studied.

## Mammals

There are 34 species of mammals in the park, although most are rarely seen by visitors. The Asian black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), is medium sized and largely herbivorous (**see below for what to do in case of a bear encounter**). The Japanese serow (*Capricornis crispus*) is a kind of goat-antelope, an even-toed bovine. One favorite animal, though rarely spotted, is the Japanese stoat (*okojo*; *Mustela erminea Nippon*). While it appears adorable and harmless, it is a carnivorous hunter of small mammals and birds. Other mammals sometimes spotted include rabbits and the tiny Japanese dormouse.



Asian black bear



Japanese serow



Japanese Stoat

## Bear Encounter Tips

Asian black bears are less aggressive than many species of bears and tend to avoid humans. They can be dangerous if they feel threatened or are caught by surprise. Visitors are encouraged to ring the bells that are placed in certain areas along the boardwalks, and to let bears know humans are near by clapping or talking. If you encounter a bear, do not make loud noises or run, but slowly and quietly exit the area.



Bell

## Birds

Over 160 bird species have been reported in the park. Many migratory birds prefer the marshlands, while others make their home in the forests. The chestnut-eared bunting (*Emberiza fucata*), Indian spot-billed duck (*Anas poecilorhyncha*), and Latham's snipe (*Gallinago hardwickii*) can be spotted in the marshes. The forests shelter the Great spotted woodpecker (*Dendrocopos major*), the narcissus flycatcher (*Ficedula narcissina*), and the bush warbler (*Horornis diphone*), once called the Japanese nightingale for the beauty of its song. The alpine accentor (*Prunella collaris*) and the spotted nutcracker (*Nucifraga caryocatactes*) can be found in rocky areas at the higher altitudes.



▲ Chestnut-eared bunting

## Amphibians

Nine species of amphibians live in the park, including the Montane brown frog (*Rana ornativentris*), which is endemic to Japan, and the Japanese fire belly newt (*Cynops pyrrhogaster*), often spotted from the boardwalks over the ponds and rivers. Others, like the Tohoku salamander (*Hynobius lichenatus*), are more difficult to spot.



▲ Montane brown frog



▲ Japanese Fire belly newt

## Fish

Ten species of fish, including the trout-like iwana (*Salvelinus*), and the tiny Amur minnow, live in Oze. Though grilled iwana is a favorite local dish, fishing is not allowed in the park.



▲ iwana (*Salvelinus*)



▲ pygmy dragonfly

## Insects

Oze's ecosystems are ideal for insects, and a wide variety can be found throughout the ponds, rivers, marshlands, and forests of the park. These include dragonflies that only inhabit cold areas and butterflies that prefer high altitudes. Among them are the damselfly (*Zygoptera*), the scarlet dwarf or pygmy dragonfly (*Nannophya pygmaea*), and the Old World swallowtail butterfly (*Papilio machaon*).

# Oze History of Conservation

Oze has been a pioneer in nature conservation since early visitors fell in love with the landscape and determined to protect it.

During the Edo period (1603–1868), the area was often visited by hunters and fishermen, drawn to the game attracted by the lush marshes. The Aizu-Numata road, a mountain route used to carry food and other goods between the district to the north (Aizu) and the southern district (Joshu), passed across the Oze area. By the end of the Meiji era (1868–1912), the first mountain lodge was built, and Oze's topography became the subject of research and nature studies.



The Oze area was first targeted for development in 1903 as part of a plan to construct a system of dams and tunnels that would supply hydroelectric power to a swiftly modernizing Japan. Luckily, nature enthusiasts were able to organize and stop the plan. Their activism became more focused with the establishment of the Oze Conservation Association in 1949.

◻ The boardwalks is constructed manually. The most recognizable symbols of Oze's conservation approach are the boardwalks that protect the fragile surface of the national park's marshlands. In the beginning they were just logs laid across spots that were difficult to cross; later the logs were split and laid flat, making walking around the marshes even easier. By the 1950s, the damage from increasing numbers of visitors had become apparent, and serious work on the boardwalk system began in 1952. These boardwalks, most of them raised above the surface of the marsh, now extend over 54 kilometers.

Oze was once slated for road development, but this, too, was blocked by environmental activists. When trash left by climbers and hikers began to overwhelm the area, Oze began a campaign to get visitors to take their waste home with them. The campaign was successful, and the movement spread to other areas around Japan dealing with the same issue.

Most recently, Oze has established programs aimed at maintaining the area's water quality and promoting the use of clean energy, such as solar power. Through the efforts of park staff and volunteers, and with the cooperation of visitors, Oze will continue to protect the park's natural resources.



◻ The trash left by climbers and hikers ◻ A campaign to get visitors to take their waste home with them

# A Hiking Guide to Oze

Oze has well-maintained hiking courses for every class of hiker, from the level boardwalks that crisscross the marshlands to steep mountain trails that reach high above the tree line. Hikers should keep in mind that the weather can be very unpredictable, due to the ring of surrounding mountains. A perfectly clear, warm morning can turn misty and cold by afternoon, and vice versa. Visitors are encouraged to wear appropriate clothing that is comfortable, and bring rain gear and extra layers.

## WHAT TO WEAR

### Hat

Solar rays are strong at high altitudes, so a hat with a brim is recommended.

### Underwear or base layer

Light synthetic or wool fabric that will dry quickly.

### Long-sleeved shirt

Quick-drying materials recommended.

### Socks and shoes

Thick socks and comfortable yet sturdy walking shoes. For mountain trails, high-cut hiking boots.

### Backpack

Size depends on length of hike and tent use. A rain cover is recommended.

### Hiking pants

Lightweight synthetic, long pants, or shorts over tights.



## WHAT TO CARRY

Warm layer (fleece, down, or synthetic fabric shirt)

Waterproof jacket and pants

Drinking water

Garbage bag

## Oze's Mountain Lodges

There are over 20 mountain lodges (*yamagoya*) in Oze National Park, offering accommodation for hikers with two full meals and hot baths. Visitors should be aware that meals are served early, because Japanese hikers tend to arrive by mid-afternoon and make early starts in the morning. Breakfast is usually served at 6:00 A.M., with the evening meal at 5:00 or 5:30 P.M. These lodges have been operated by the same families for generations and the staff are founts of knowledge about Oze's history, nature, and other aspects of the park. They help maintain the trails as well and can update visitors on hiking and weather conditions. All the lodges follow strong conservation protocols, including toilet systems that do not pollute the water table. Guests are asked to cooperate with these efforts, including carrying out any garbage they brought in.



Staying at one of the lodges for a night or two gives hikers a deeper experience and appreciation for Oze's wild natural environment. During golden hour, the early evening sun bathes the area in a warm light, and the air cools quickly after sunset. With little light pollution, Oze is one of Japan's best sites for viewing the night sky. Early risers can enjoy the fog banks that cover the marshes, slowly rising to unveil the mountains around the plateau. Note that the lodges can get crowded, particularly in peak seasons, so reservations should be made well in advance.



# Suggested Hiking Courses

Hikers can plan their own routes using the trails that crisscross the park, through marshes and mountain forests. These are two sample courses, a one-day hike around the marshes, and a two-day hike that includes climbing Mt. Shibutsu.

## Sample Course 1 Woodland Wonders and High-altitude Marshlands

***A beginner-friendly descent through mountain forests to the marsh plateau and back, offering splendid views of the valley***

Route : Hatomachi-toge Pass – Yamanohana – Ryugu-jujiro Crossroad – Yoppi Suspension Bridge – Hatomachi-toge Pass  
Total time : 6 hours  
Level : Easy

### Details

This hike is mostly downhill or over flat boardwalks, except for the final ascent back up to the park's entrance. The first hour is a descent to Yamanohana, where hikers will find a Visitor Center, lodges, and a campsite. From there, the trail leads across the broad, open expanse of the marshes, with great views of the surrounding mountains, ponds, and seasonal marsh flowers. Every so often, there are rest areas, wooden platforms with benches where people may eat or rest their legs. This course follows a circular route around the marshes, but can be shortened by turning back at the Ryugu-jujiro crossroad.

## Sample Course 2 Up the Serpentinite Trail

***For experienced hikers, this two-day course features a steep ascent of Mt. Shibutsu, for panoramic views in all directions.***

Route: Hatomachi-toge Pass – Yamanohana – Marsh walks – Mt. Shibutsu – Hatomachi-toge Pass  
Total time: 2 days (6 hours per day)  
Level: Easy (Day 1); Hard (Day 2)

The first day follows the same itinerary as the first sample course. Be sure to reserve accommodation at one of the lodges in Yamanohana or the Ryugu-jujiro crossroad. On the second day, get up early and take the trailhead at Yamanohana. The trail climbs steeply through the forest before rising above the tree line. Note that the serpentinite rock underfoot can be very slippery, particularly when wet, and the wind can be strong. From Mt. Shibutsu, hikers will get open views of the marshes on the plateau and the volcanic mountains surrounding the area. The descent follows the ridge route down to Hatomachi-toge Pass.





# How You can Help

All visitors can contribute to preserving Oze's natural environment.

## Stay on the Paths

The boardwalks and hiking paths have been built to protect the park's wildlife and natural environment from damage. Hundreds of thousands of visitors come to Oze each year, and we need everyone's cooperation.

## Take Everything You Bring to the Park Home with You

A single piece of litter can affect the park's fragile environment. Take all the pictures you want but be sure to leave the park with all your garbage.

## Water Quality Is Everyone's Business

Water is a precious resource in Oze. Don't use soap or shampoo at the campsites or in the mountain hut's baths.

## Think of Others

Oze is a place to get back to nature. Let others experience the natural sights and sounds without disturbances.

## If You Need Help . . .

The staff at the Visitor Centers can answer questions and provide information to park guests. Feel free to drop by and share your feedback.

# Information

## Oze-Yamanohana Visitor Center

Activities in and around Ozegahara Marsh/Mt. Shibutsu and a source of information The Oze-Yamanohana Visitor Center is located at the access point to Ozegahara Marsh. The Foundation staff stationed at the center provide information on Oze's natural environment. Daily nature information collected by staff is posted at the center, so feel free to drop by before exploring the area.

Opening hours

7:00 - 18:00

Staff-stationed hours

7:30 - 16:00



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