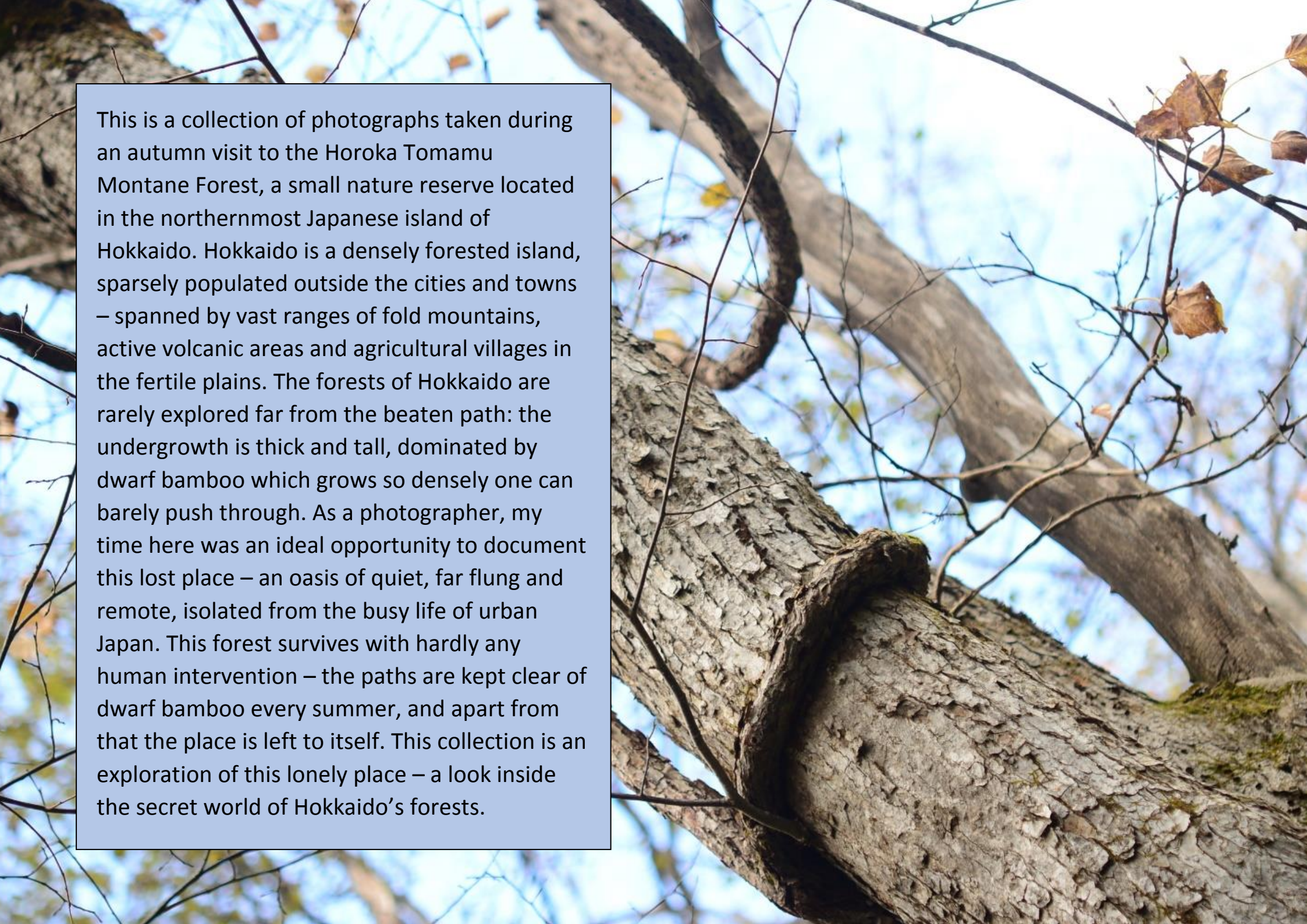





Horoka Tomamu

A photo essay by Elen Averis



This is a collection of photographs taken during an autumn visit to the Horoka Tomamu Montane Forest, a small nature reserve located in the northernmost Japanese island of Hokkaido. Hokkaido is a densely forested island, sparsely populated outside the cities and towns – spanned by vast ranges of fold mountains, active volcanic areas and agricultural villages in the fertile plains. The forests of Hokkaido are rarely explored far from the beaten path: the undergrowth is thick and tall, dominated by dwarf bamboo which grows so densely one can barely push through. As a photographer, my time here was an ideal opportunity to document this lost place – an oasis of quiet, far flung and remote, isolated from the busy life of urban Japan. This forest survives with hardly any human intervention – the paths are kept clear of dwarf bamboo every summer, and apart from that the place is left to itself. This collection is an exploration of this lonely place – a look inside the secret world of Hokkaido’s forests.



Horoka Tomamu is a forest with many faces. A forest overflowing with growth, life and brilliance. All the plants and trees are tangled together in a defiant show of nature. I loved this place and I hope that shows in my photographs.

In a wider Japanese context this place might not be considered 'special'. Most of the island is covered in forest, continuing almost unbroken across entire mountain ranges. This tiny snippet of a much wider environment is fascinating – to experience its immensity and remoteness is a very powerful feeling; this one small mountain feels like (and indeed is) part of something much bigger.



One of the first things anyone will notice about this place is how hard it is to navigate off the path – the undergrowth is dominated by dwarf bamboo so thick that most other plants are choked out. This dense layer is almost human height, taller in places, and turns an otherwise short walk into a jungle expedition. The leaves and stems are incredibly tough and make the plant so resilient, but they have a simple beauty to them and the fallen foliage creates masses of leaf litter that is home for a significant amount of wildlife. Every ecological niche in this place seems to be filled. Even the dwarf bamboo has a specialised predator, as evidenced by the picture opposite: this is probably the work of a leaf-cutter bee.



The forest is visible in its full autumn colour for only a week or two in October every year, during the period of 'Koyo' – the turning of the leaves of the deciduous trees. A few weeks after this show everything gets buried in snow for several months. It is the last great display of life before the winter comes. I was very lucky to see the colours during my visit, and by the end of my week there they were starting to fade away. The Maple Gate (see photo below) is a very large downy Japanese-maple (*Acer japonicum*) perched atop the ridge of the mountain, in between the two summits. The path passes between the multiple trunks of the tree and functions, albeit in a symbolic way, as a gate between the two peaks.



What caught my eye was the contrast between the trunk of the tree and the foliage, the entire object possessing a sculptural quality, as if it were 'created' with an eye for perfect aesthetics. The way it grows is very elegant; the branches very slender and neat yet possessing an expressive quality in the unpredictable kinks and curves in the stems. The red leaves created a mesmerizing effect against the blue autumn sky – the whole thing was wonderful to photograph, so I have included quite a few pictures here.





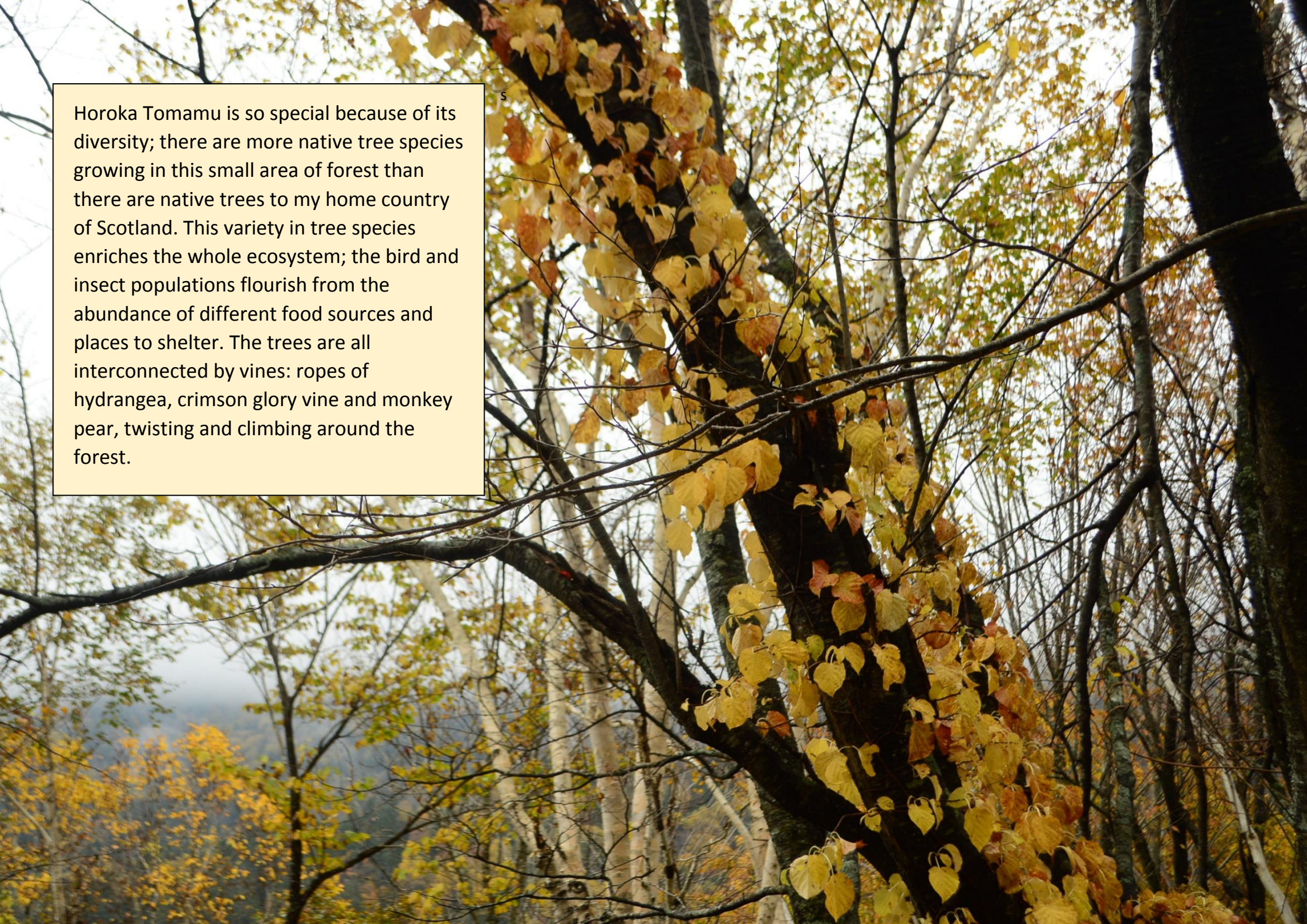


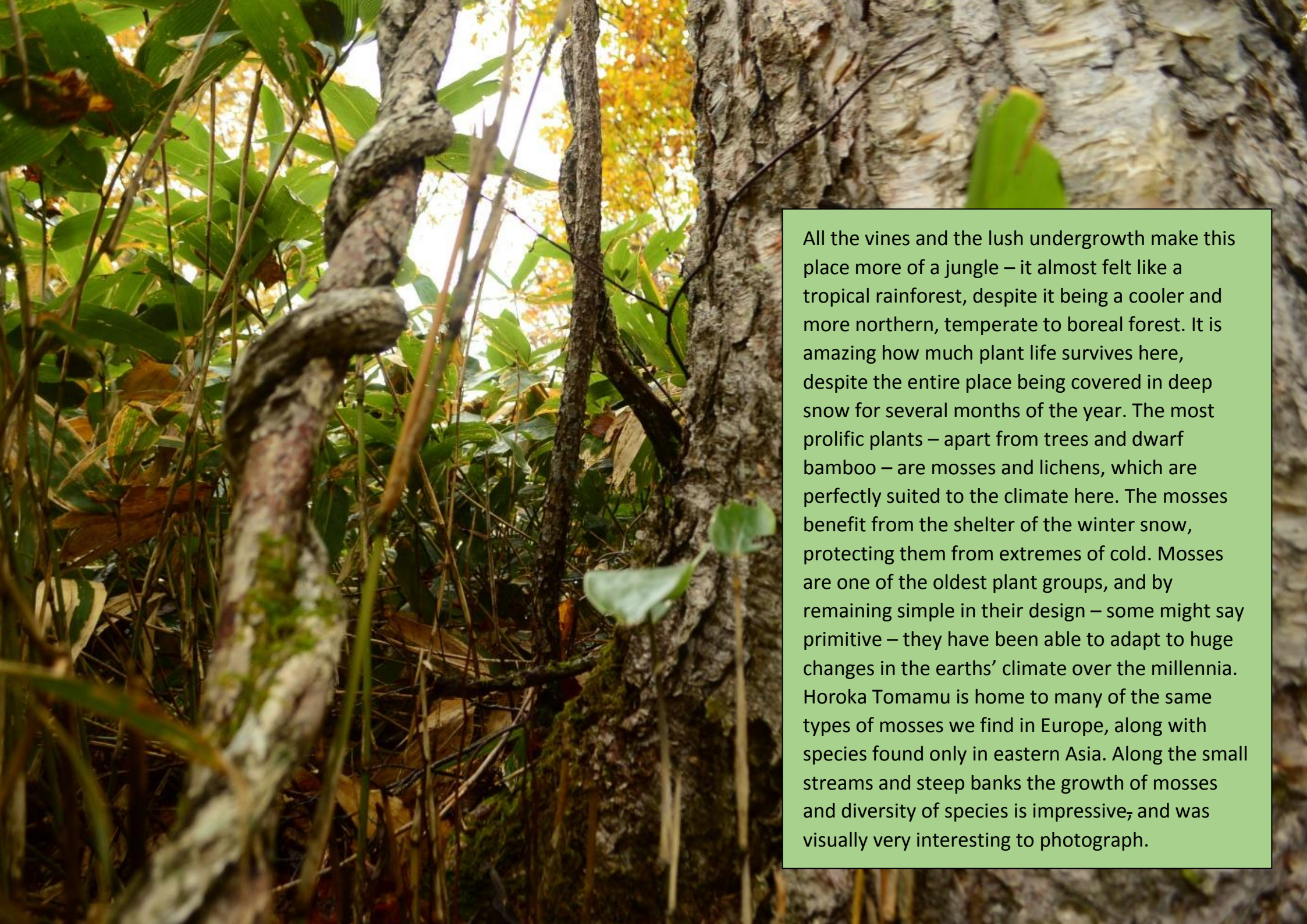




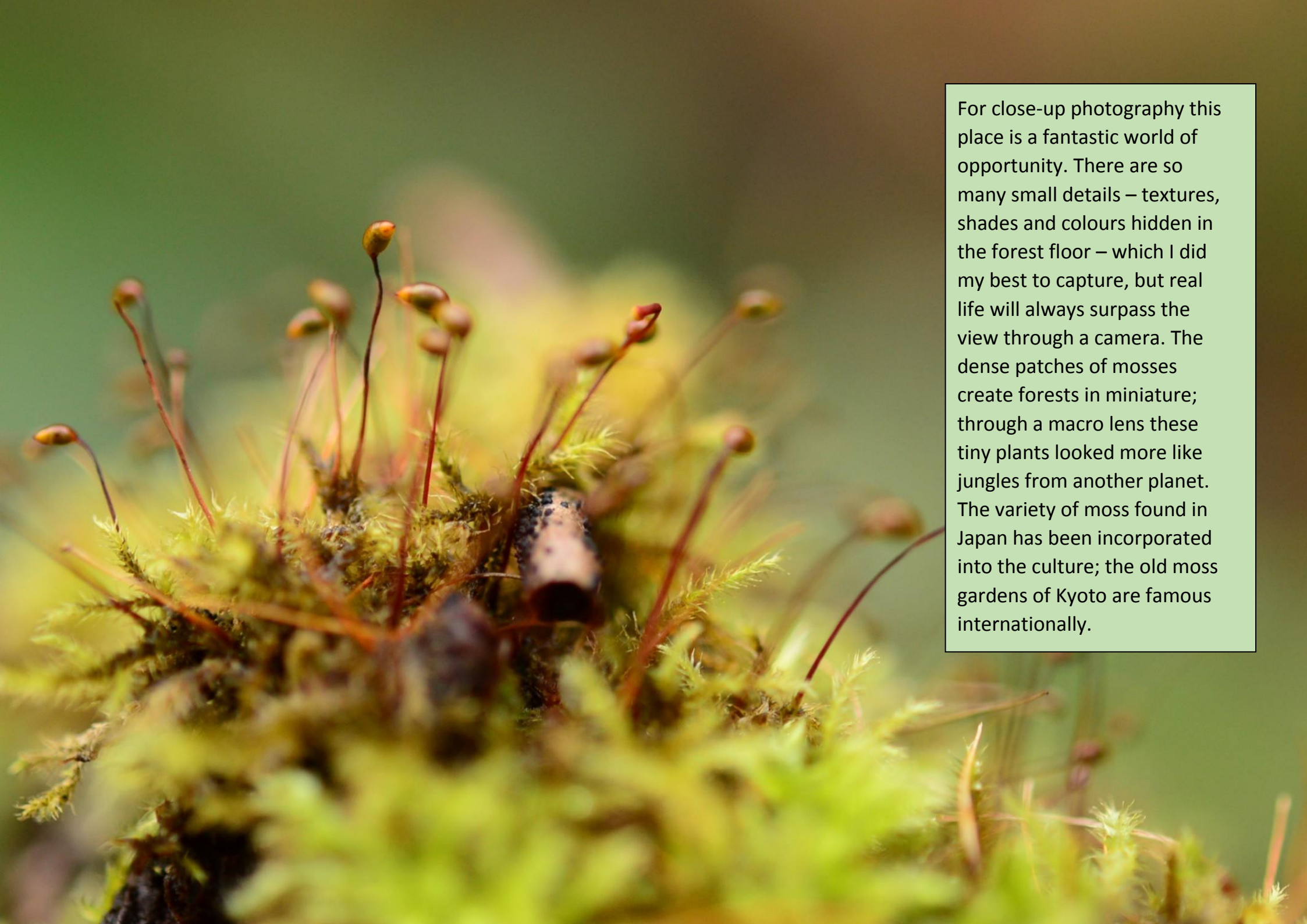


Horoka Tomamu is so special because of its diversity; there are more native tree species growing in this small area of forest than there are native trees to my home country of Scotland. This variety in tree species enriches the whole ecosystem; the bird and insect populations flourish from the abundance of different food sources and places to shelter. The trees are all interconnected by vines: ropes of hydrangea, crimson glory vine and monkey pear, twisting and climbing around the forest.





All the vines and the lush undergrowth make this place more of a jungle – it almost felt like a tropical rainforest, despite it being a cooler and more northern, temperate to boreal forest. It is amazing how much plant life survives here, despite the entire place being covered in deep snow for several months of the year. The most prolific plants – apart from trees and dwarf bamboo – are mosses and lichens, which are perfectly suited to the climate here. The mosses benefit from the shelter of the winter snow, protecting them from extremes of cold. Mosses are one of the oldest plant groups, and by remaining simple in their design – some might say primitive – they have been able to adapt to huge changes in the earth's climate over the millennia. Horoka Tomamu is home to many of the same types of mosses we find in Europe, along with species found only in eastern Asia. Along the small streams and steep banks the growth of mosses and diversity of species is impressive, and was visually very interesting to photograph.



For close-up photography this place is a fantastic world of opportunity. There are so many small details – textures, shades and colours hidden in the forest floor – which I did my best to capture, but real life will always surpass the view through a camera. The dense patches of mosses create forests in miniature; through a macro lens these tiny plants looked more like jungles from another planet. The variety of moss found in Japan has been incorporated into the culture; the old moss gardens of Kyoto are famous internationally.











A clubmoss – commonly mistaken for mosses, these are more closely related to ferns.





This photo features not only moss, but lichen too. Lichens come in a wonderfully diverse range of shapes and colours, and the prevalence of them at Horoka Tomamu points toward a clean environment: lichens are well known for being indicators of good air quality.

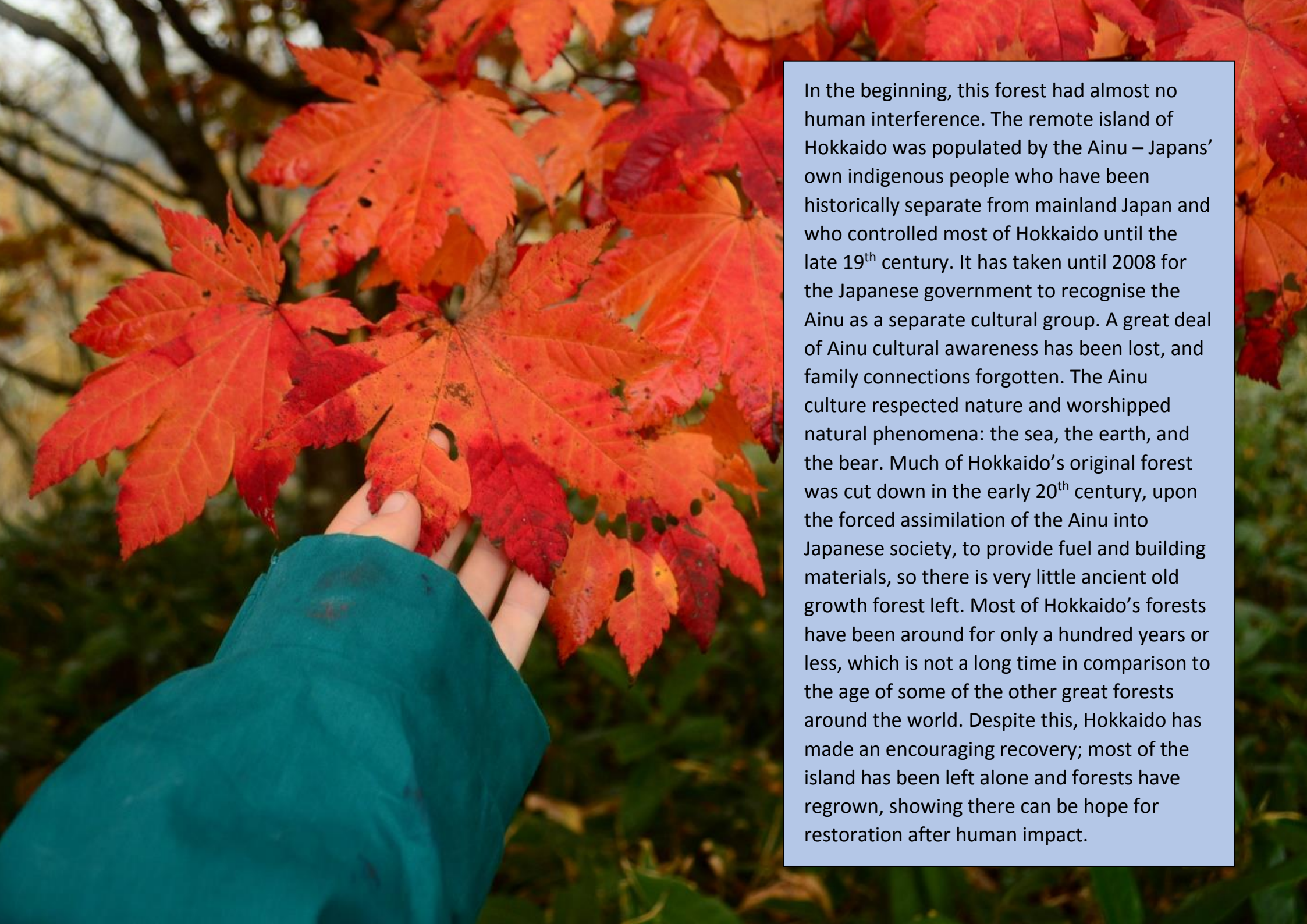


As a temperate-boreal mixed forest, this place is home to an extraordinary variety of fungi. There seems to be a fungus for everything here; all the dead plant material gets processed and recycled, with each species of mushroom appearing to prefer feeding on something different. Fungi are what keeps the ecosystem working, by taking the nutrients from the dead and giving them back to the living to be used again. The scale of fungi is enormous. All we can see above the ground are the fruiting bodies; the rest of the organism is spread out beneath a much larger area, through a mycorrhizal network. From bracket fungi feeding on the dead wood high above the ground to the panther caps on the forest floor below, the richness of this place shows through the wealth of different kinds of life. The fungi are just one part in this whole system – all the organisms together in this undisturbed (but, of course, continually changing) environment.









In the beginning, this forest had almost no human interference. The remote island of Hokkaido was populated by the Ainu – Japan's own indigenous people who have been historically separate from mainland Japan and who controlled most of Hokkaido until the late 19th century. It has taken until 2008 for the Japanese government to recognise the Ainu as a separate cultural group. A great deal of Ainu cultural awareness has been lost, and family connections forgotten. The Ainu culture respected nature and worshipped natural phenomena: the sea, the earth, and the bear. Much of Hokkaido's original forest was cut down in the early 20th century, upon the forced assimilation of the Ainu into Japanese society, to provide fuel and building materials, so there is very little ancient old growth forest left. Most of Hokkaido's forests have been around for only a hundred years or less, which is not a long time in comparison to the age of some of the other great forests around the world. Despite this, Hokkaido has made an encouraging recovery; most of the island has been left alone and forests have regrown, showing there can be hope for restoration after human impact.





An area of old growth forest on the steep western slopes of the mountain. Many of the largest trees have been damaged by typhoons, but there is no shortage of impressive specimens.










Autumn in the forest comes with the maturing of many different types of flowering plants and the distribution of their seeds. Most of the green vegetation, minus the dwarf bamboo, will have died away by the time the snow comes in late November / early December, and the mountain will lie dormant until next spring.

Photographed here is the heartleaf lily (*Cardiocrinum cordatum*) – one of the biggest plants on the reserve, able to reach a height of 1.8 metres. The seed pods are packed with thousands of paper-thin packages, each one consisting of the seed in the middle and a streamlined outer wing, so the seeds are distributed by the wind over as great a distance as possible.

A top-down view of a forest floor in autumn. The ground is covered with a thick layer of fallen leaves in various shades of brown, orange, and yellow. Several fallen tree branches are scattered across the leaves, some showing light-colored bark and others with green moss. The overall scene is a mosaic of vibrant, jewel-like colors.

The variety of tree species is apparent in the dense layer of leaves on the ground. The forest floor is a mosaic of vibrant, jewel like colours.

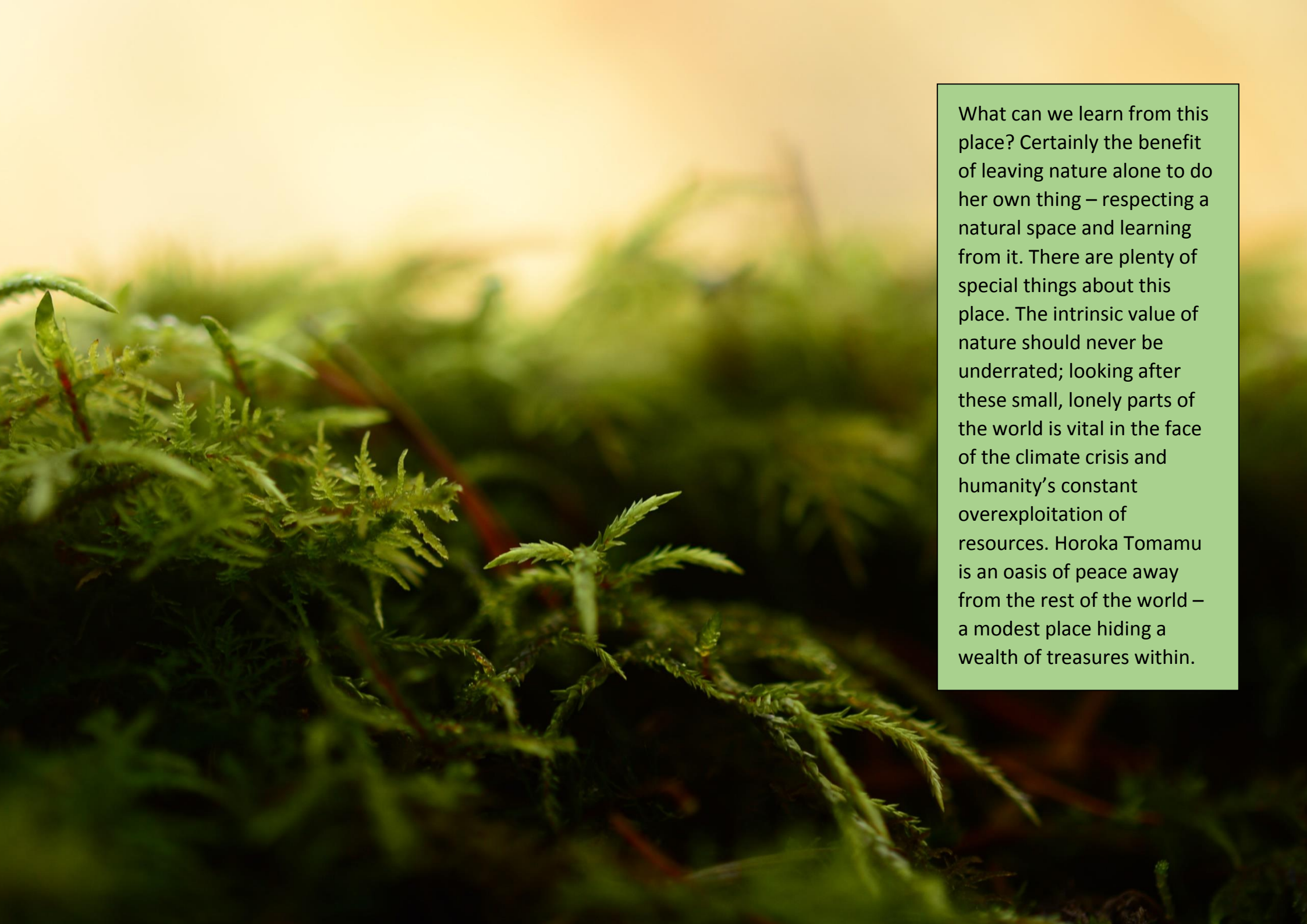




An empty cicada exoskeleton clinging to the underside of a fallen tree. The nights here ring with the chirping of cicadas, alien to my British ears and a wonderful thing to hear – a reminder of how alive this place is. The exoskeletons can be found everywhere and are fascinating objects, full of tiny details and with extremely large claws for a creature so small.







What can we learn from this place? Certainly the benefit of leaving nature alone to do her own thing – respecting a natural space and learning from it. There are plenty of special things about this place. The intrinsic value of nature should never be underrated; looking after these small, lonely parts of the world is vital in the face of the climate crisis and humanity's constant overexploitation of resources. Horoka Tomamu is an oasis of peace away from the rest of the world – a modest place hiding a wealth of treasures within.



Thanks to:

Masumi and Simon Holledge, the custodians of Horoka Tomamu Montane Forest, for commissioning the project, allowing me the space and time to grow while completing this work and giving me the opportunity to travel to this unique place.

My father Ben Averis for his support and guidance, and his knowledge of the plants found here – a real help while I was completing this!