

CHARACTER REFERENCE

Mascots gather on stage at the Yuru-kyara Summit in Saitama Prefecture, November 28, 2010.



ALL PHOTOS YUICHI ITABASHI

Yuru-kyara mascot characters, created by local governments and regional business groups as PR tools to boost development and promote specialties, enjoy nationwide popularity. Unlike the characters designed by professionals, such as the mascots of major corporations, their distinctive feature is their appearance of having been handmade by local people. They are, in a sense, ordinary people's own versions of the venerable Mickey Mouse. "Yuru-kyara" is an abbreviation of "yurui" and "masukotto kyarakutaa" (mascot). "Yurui" here is used in the sense of making people feel good, provoking a smile; cute, but with an unsophisticated design.

On November 28, the Yuru-kyara Summit was held in Saitama Prefecture to promote local tourism-related activities. Some eighty-five yuru-kyara gathered at the event, which was attended by approximately 50,000 people.

The event materialized from the fact that Saitama Prefecture possesses relatively few tourism resources such as coastlines or mountains and so has come to concentrate on the manufacture of local characters as a trump card to alert tourists to the attractive features it does boast. Each participating character performed a dance or other display on the stage, using actions and hand gestures to urge people to visit their town.



▶ **HIKONYAN** (Hikone, Shiga Prefecture)

Hikonyan, the official mascot for the city of Hikone, was created in 2007 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Hikone Castle. The character is a sword-wielding white cat sporting a samurai helmet topped with two yellow horns. The success of Hikonyan-based merchandise, which ranges from stuffed toys to socks and sweets, helped start the yuru-kyara boom.

MINAKAMI ONSEN OIDE-CHAN ▶

(Minakami, Gunma Prefecture)

Oide-chan was created as the young proprietress of a hot spring inn who has married into the family which runs it. The character's main role is to greet visitors to town events. The woman accompanying Oide-chan is the actual proprietress.



▶ **KOBATON**

The official mascot of the Yuru-kyara Summit's host prefecture, Saitama. The character is inspired by a bird that inhabits the prefecture, the *shirakobato*, or collared turtle dove.

GEOMARU ▶

Geomaru is the official mascot for Itoigawa Geopark, location of the major geological fault which divides Japan into east and west.

