

FGL Community Newsletter

Pop on some skis, tour the winter
Tohoku landscape, and welcome the
new year with the FGL Newsletter!

Winter

2025/26



ASK SENSEI: HAYATO YOKOI
WINTER ACTIVITIES IN TOHOKU: SKIING
SENDAI WINTER TRIP: A WARM REUNION
INDOOR HOBBIES

Ask Sensei: Hayato Yokoi

Koharu Miyoshi

At the end of 2025, I had the opportunity to interview Professor Yokoi of the Laboratory of Fish Genetics in the Department of Agriculture. Professor Yokoi has research experience with the National Institute of Genetics, the National Institute for Basic Biology, the University of Tokyo, and the University of Oregon.

Q. Could you briefly introduce yourself, your background, and your research?

I was born and raised in Nagoya, and stayed there throughout university until I graduated the PhD course from Nagoya University's Faculty of Science. In my graduation thesis I studied genes involved in sex determination in medaka (Japanese rice fish), and from there I studied the evolutionary developmental biology of medaka until I got my PhD.



After my PhD, I moved to the National Institute of Genetics, where a medaka mutant hunting project was ongoing. It was well funded, and about 10 researchers were recruited to that project. I was one of those. The mutant I studied showed a striking phenotype lacked most of the trunk and tail structure, but the head developed normally. It took 2 to 3 years to find out the causative gene, but then it turned out that the gene identified was not a novel gene. That was kind of disappointing.

However, during the mutant hunting project, I had a chance to join another collaborative research project at the EMBL (European Molecular Biology Laboratory) in Heidelberg, Germany. There, I happened to have a conversation with a friend over tea. At that time, we just knew that we were studying fish with similar phenotypes. After I came back to Japan, I continued the mutant analysis research. When I found out the causative gene, I communicated the disappointing results with him, and while trying to encourage me he gave me some interesting unpublished data: the gene he was studying was a ligand, and my gene was a receptor, so these genes function together. That was information that could be used as new research. That accidental conversation became an international collaboration study.

Here (at Tohoku University), I'm studying left-right asymmetrical development of Japanese flounder. The Japanese flounder is very important in terms of aquaculture or fisheries research. Also, the body shape of flounder is very weird, so that satisfies my basic scientific interest. Basically, I want to learn why that body shape develops and how they can be so different.

Q. I see. Then, how did you end up going to the University of Oregon?

The NIG project was a 5-year project. As the 5-year limit approached, my boss—the professor—gathered all the research team members in his office and told us that unfortunately he could only hire us up to next March. This was in the summer. I had, let's say, 6 or 7 months, and then I had to find the next post-doc position.

At the time, I was thinking whether to find a position in Japan or to go abroad. One reason I wanted to go abroad was because of the scientific level: science in the U.S. or Europe is at a much higher level than Japan. The other reason is the language barrier. Every time I attended international scientific meetings, I felt frustration either understanding other scientists' presentations or understanding their questions on my own presentation. Thus, I thought it was essential to go abroad to become an international-level researcher. Also on my mind was my mom. My mom always told me that I should go out to see the world.

That was how I decided to go abroad. I chose Oregon because it's kind of a Mecca for fish research. Also, I consulted my professor from Nagoya University, Professor Ozato, and he gave me some advice about the principal investigators— the head researchers— for each lab that I wanted to move to. He recommended one, and that was Professor John Postlethwait at the University of Oregon.

Q. What was your biggest takeaway from your time at UO?

The biggest lesson was from John (Professor Postlethwait). We were talking about research attitudes, and I was telling him I felt a lot of pressure when I was at the University of Tokyo. There was no clear competition within the laboratory. But I felt a lot of unspoken pressure because all of the surrounding students and researchers were so excellent that I thought I also had to be equally excellent. I was telling this to John, and he said having genius colleagues or genius students could be a good thing. Science continues by passing things on, he said. So, having outstanding colleagues is not a source of pressure, but rather a happy thing.

That was eye-opening. I had never thought that way before. Basically, we're going to get old, and one day we won't be able to do experiments anymore, but if we have such excellent colleagues or students, we can pass on our research or knowledge. After that, I saw things differently. I didn't have to feel pressure when I saw great colleagues; we could just be colleagues, not competitors.

Out of sheer luck, I found very good positions, both at UO and at Tohoku University. But when I was in a difficult spot, my boss from NIG, Professor Takeda, responded to me immediately with warm and encouraging words, despite his super busy schedule. I want to become that kind of person who can help someone at a critical time. Also, John was so kind. When I joined his lab, I could read and write English, but I couldn't communicate at this speed. John paid for my language school, saying, "It's an investment into you."

Q. This goes back to your general research, but was there some sort of catalyst for why you became interested in genetics specifically?

I originally liked fish, maybe because my dad took me out fishing when I was little, and also because there are many different types of fish with different body shapes or colors. I had a fish tank with tropical fish when I was in junior high school, and I enjoyed watching the fish with their variety of shapes and behaviors. Then I became interested in why such different body shapes and colors had formed. How those formed should be written in the genetic code, so if we understand their genome, we can understand the reason behind diversified body shapes and colors.

Q. Finally, is there any advice you would like to give to students?

I recommend you to go out. I mean this in many different ways. Go out from your comfort zone to meet different people, different ways of thinking, or different countries or different languages or cultures, whatever. Go out. I guess those who are reading this have already done this, as you guys are reaching out to Japan!

And I hope you pursue what you want. Don't wait. If there's something you want to know, reach out and express that to someone, like someone who has similar interests. I especially hope for you to connect with people of different backgrounds.

Finally, respect each other. Whatever the reason, do not look down on what others feel to be important. You may not be able to understand it, but don't judge what is precious to others by your own standards. There must be something unknown, so try to appreciate and enjoy it.

Winter activities in Tohoku – Skiing

Robert Szymon Wrobel

Japan is well known for its 四季【しき】 , that is, the four seasons. Each season—spring, summer, autumn, and winter—is very special, with a unique vibe, weather, and FGL newsletter. Even though each season is very enjoyable, I feel like Tohoku's winter feels special.

For many 1st-year FGL students, their first experience with snow takes place here, just 2 months after enrollment. The first time means seeing the snow slowly falling from the sky, touching the snow, forming a snowball, and throwing it at your friend, building a snowman. In Tohoku, it snows much more than in most of Japan, especially compared to the southwest of Tokyo. In fact, we get enough snow here to enjoy not only the above activities, but also much more! One of those is skiing, which I would like to focus on in this article.

Skiing is a great way to experience winter. It brings a feeling of freedom while sliding from the top of a mountain all the way to the bottom, often accompanied by beautiful views of the surrounding snowy mountainous wonderlands. Although it might seem difficult, if you start on a beginner-friendly slope, you will learn fast. Tohoku has countless places where you can ski, commonly called スキー場【すきーじょう】 in Japanese. Each ski resort will have slopes both for beginners and more advanced skiers, so everyone can enjoy it. What is more, some of them are easily accessible by public transportation! Specifically, I would like to introduce 3 resorts with such easy access.

The closest and most beginner-friendly one is the Izumigatake Ski Resort, just north of Sendai. You can get there by taking a direct bus from Izumichuo subway station, which is the last stop on the Namboku line. The full-day ski lift ticket is ¥3400 after the student discount. It is open from 9:00 to 16:00, with 2 km of ski slopes and 4 ski lifts. Their website is available at <https://izumigatake.info/>.

If you would like to go for an intermediate option, a reasonable choice is the Miyagi Zao Shiroishi Ski Resort, located just south of Sendai. To get there, you first take the JR Tohoku line to the Shiroishi Station and then a free shuttle bus (reservation only) to the resort itself. The full-day ski lift ticket is ¥2500 after the student discount. It is open from 8:30 to 16:30, with 5 km of ski slopes and 4 ski lifts. Their website is available at <https://nposki.com/>.

And finally, the biggest, most spectacular one is the Zao Onsen Ski Resort, the 6th biggest ski resort in the whole of Japan! You can get there in many ways, but the most convenient one is a direct bus from Sendai station (reservation only). The full-day ski lift ticket is ¥8000; it is open from 8:00 to 17:00 and has a whopping 50 km of ski slopes with 35 ski lifts. Their website is available at <https://zaomountainresort.com/ski/>.

What about the ski rental? Worry not! Tohoku University can give you the full skiing or snowboarding equipment for FREE. It is possible to reserve it in the AO1 building on the Kawauchi campus on the first floor, East Wing of the Education and Student Support Center, Activities Support Section (2nd Window), at the Student Services Division (学生支援課 2 番窓口). But that's not where free services end! If you log in to the MajiBu service, run by jalan.net, and you are between 19 and 21 years old, you will find that some of the ski resorts will provide FREE ski lift tickets! For example, the Izumigatake Ski Resort has free tickets on weekdays. Find more information at <https://www.jalan.net/majibu>.

With all this information, I hope you can widen your pastime options and enjoy skiing this winter!

Sendai Winter Trip: A Warm Reunion

Chonmabhum (I-nam) Chaisrisawatsuk, Pavarit Phanichkul

For many international students, one of the quintessential experiences we share is, of course, the feeling of solitude that often comes with moving alone to a foreign place, for the first time in our lives. Especially in Japan, the heavy language barrier can make it difficult to find a place where someone feels like they belong. It is like us human beings, as social creatures, to seek out a group of people with shared experiences and backgrounds, where one can hang out without exerting too much energy and especially share a common native tongue, one that they can comfortably express their feelings in. It is thus in this very nature that international students tend to gravitate towards communities from their home countries, or even in more special cases, their high school.

During the winter break, Thai alumni from KVIS (Kamnoetvidya Science Academy) who are now studying in Tohoku University decided to welcome their friends studying all across Japan to Sendai for a reunion after not having seen each other in years. We, the writers, were glad to plan the trip. Sendai, as the main hub of the Tohoku region, offers various convenient routes for beautiful touristic attractions during winter. Therefore, a 4-day trip was planned to reconnect with each other, enjoy the winter scenery, and lastly, ensure a wonderful memory in Sendai.

Day 1 (30th Dec 2025): Shiroishi Castle & Zao Fox Village

In the morning, we took the train from JR Sendai Station to Shiroishi Station. After some sightseeing at Shiroishi Castle, we headed to Zao Fox Village. During the winter, it is a pleasing time to visit, as these fluffy creatures are relaxed and resting. The village has various species of foxes, including the Japanese red fox and the arctic fox. Some wandered freely around us, while others were pleased to be cuddled, making it a heart-warming experience for everyone.

Day 2 (31st Dec 2025): Yamadera

During winter, Yamadera offers a completely different atmosphere from other seasons. Unlike during autumn, when the vibrant red and yellow leaves decorated the mountain, the powdery winter snow covered the mountain in a thin white blanket. The steps are slippery, so extra caution is needed during this time of the year – spiked boots are highly recommended. We also took time to stop by the Risshaku-ji (立石寺) Temple to offer prayers and wishes for good fortune in the coming year. After coming back to Sendai, we prepared dinner, played some games of charades, and counted together for the next year to finally begin.

Day 3 (1st Jan 2026): Matsushima

On the 1st day of the year, everyone went out early in the morning, when the dark and cold of the night still enveloped our bodies. Straight from the gate of JR Sendai Station, we took a train to Rikuzen Hamada Station and walked along the quiet roadside for around 30 minutes. Through the trees and hills, we didn't expect that once we emerged from the main road, we would find ourselves at one of the coastal hills of Matsushima. As we trekked along the battered pathway, we got to take in the early morning view of the Sendai coastal area, dimly lit by the yet-out-of-sight sun and the fishing lights. Thus, the cold breeze blew, and the first sun of the year emerged from its hiding spot amongst the sea-level clouds, casting a ray of warmth against the cold, harsh morning, illuminating the first morning of the year with its picturesque light.

Day 4 (2nd Jan 2026): Geibikei & Hiraizumi

Our final day started at JR Sendai Station, where we traveled to Kogota Station, then onwards to Ichinoseki and Geibikei Gorge. At Geibikei, we got to ride on the traditional Kotatsu boat and took in the amazing winter scenery. The gondolier, who was able to speak English, kindly explained the surrounding landscapes and beautiful sights along the route. He told us that the name "Geibikei" came from the mountain at the end of the gorge that resembles a lion's nose (貌鼻). In addition, there was also a fortune stone-throwing activity at the Dakeibi area, said to predict your luck for the year. Subsequently, we took the train back to Ichinoseki and went to Hiraizumi station. Our destination was the Chuson-ji (中尊寺) Temple. Its main attraction lies in the Konjikido (金色堂), which has been completely covered in gold for centuries. After the day's travels, we ended the trip with karaoke, enjoying our final moments together before it was finally time to say, "see you again."

Thank you for reading this volume of our newsletter, and we hope that all of you prospective international students can find a place where you feel like you belong. 4

Indoor Hobbies

Bravery Sebastian Tjahjanto

Picture this: it is 2 degrees outside after a heavy rain in the early morning. Given the options, staying indoors would be much more comfortable, although you might think being indoors all day is boring. Of course, you can always choose to sleep the whole day, which is in and of itself a productive activity to rest after a long week. However, if you have some spare energy and would like to avoid a dull day, there are a lot of indoor activities that can turn boredom into excitement. This is where indoor hobbies come into play. From creative activities to more relaxing ones, there are plenty of ways to stay engaged indoors.

Of course, the simplest method to pass the time indoors is to consume entertainment media. Beyond the obvious social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, which may kill your attention span through short-form content, you can always watch a movie, start a new series or anime, or maybe read manga or novels. I could give 6 or 7 recommendations, but 2 specifically are on my mind right now. If you are looking for a thriller, mystery, and historical manga, I highly recommend *Billy Bat* by Urasawa Naoki. If you are looking for a fun and lighthearted anime, please watch *Assassination Classroom*. They are always available for times when you don't feel like doing much and just want to unwind.

If you are looking for a more interactive and hands-on experience, creative hobbies are always an available option. Personally, I have been drawing and folding origami for years now. You only need rudimentary materials that you probably already have at home, like pencils and paper. Starting is as simple as searching for what you want to make and following some internet tutorials. Cooking follows a similar idea. You just need to find a recipe, buy ingredients, and then cook accordingly, or just use whatever ingredients you have at home and make the appropriate substitutions. These activities provide an engaging process that leads to a productive end.

For those looking for something new, I highly recommend Gunpla. Gunpla stands for Gundam plastic models, which are giant anime robots recreated at smaller scales, such as 1/144 and 1/100 scale. Upon opening a box, builders are greeted with sprues or runners of plastic pieces. With just a pair of nippers, these pieces can be cut out and assembled according to the included instructions. Once done, you get a highly detailed and poseable miniature plastic robot, often with tons of accessories for all sorts of fun.

Gunpla is also highly customisable, allowing builders to paint parts, combine elements from other kits, or experiment with their own ideas. Because of this flexibility, Gunpla remains a fun and engaging activity to enjoy indoors.

While being stuck indoors might not be ideal, it does not have to be boring. There are many ways to make use of time. With just a little curiosity, even a cold and quiet day indoors can be enjoyable.

Thank you for reading the Winter 2025/26 issue of the
FGL Community Newsletter! See you next season!

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