

Opinion

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The great birds of Joseon

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A loving touch. (Sten Bergman — In Korean Wilds and Villages)

By Robert Neff

"You often read about the falcon hunts of the days before the invention of sporting guns and smokeless powder, but these hunts must have been tame compared to a modern Korean wolf hunt with trained eagles." Thus began a newspaper article published in the United States in 1922.

The article went on to explain that many centuries ago there was "an immense isolated rock of black basalt" off the southwest coast of Korea that was used as an eagle preserve. These Korean sea-eagles had very dark plumage that grew darker with age, until it was almost black, and great pale beaks. They were said to be the "largest of any species found in temperate countries" and "were trained and used by the emperors of Korea for pursuing antelopes and wolves."

It is, perhaps, nothing more than an interesting tale: a product of a writer's imagination or a traveler's embellishment. We do, however, have other more credible accounts by Western visitors.

In the mid-1890s, Isabelle Bird Bishop wrote:

"Pheasants are literally without number and are very tame; I constantly saw them feeding among the crops within a few yards of the peasants at their work. They are usually brought down by falcons, which, when well trained, command as high a price as nine dollars.

"To obtain them three small birds are placed in a cylinder of loosely woven bamboo, mounted horizontally on a pole. On the peregrine alighting on this, a man who has been concealed throws a net over the whole. The bird is kept in a tight sleeve for three days. Then he is daily liberated in a room, and trained to follow a piece of meat pulled over the floor by a string.

"At the end of a week he is taken out on his master's wrist, and slipped when game is seen. He is not trained to return. The master rushes upon him and secures him before he has time to devour the bird. A man told me that he sometimes got between twenty and thirty pheasants a day, but had to walk or run 100 li [about 50 kilometers] to do it. The season was nearly over, yet I bought fine pheasants on the Han for three pence and four pence each. They were cheaper than chickens."



A Korean falconer. (Sten Bergman — In Korean Wilds and Villages)



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A Korean falconer searches for prey. (Sten Bergman — In Korean Wilds and Villages)

In the late 1930s, Swedish naturalist Sten Bergman went hunting with a falconer in North Hamgyeong Province. According to Bergman, there were 150 trained hawks in the province and unlike the claims in the American newspaper, these hawks generally hunted pheasants and rabbits.

Bergman's guide proudly boasted that he took as many as 300 pheasants in a season and seemed to have complete control over his hawk, which seemed unbothered by its handler's touch. However, when Bergman approached, the hawk had a "hard grim expression in its eye and looked to [Bergman] singularly untamed."

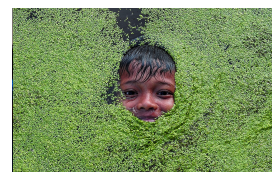
Despite his initial apprehension of the hawk, Bergman confessed that he soon "felt full of admiration for the winged hunter [once he] saw what it was capable of." The hunt was very successful and he returned home "the richer for a great experience."



Success (Sten Bergman — In Korean Wilds and Villages)

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