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Big birds of the past and present

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Master falconer Park Yong-soon with a golden eagle. February 2015.

By Robert Neff

The skies over Seoul were once filled with great birds – some were hunters and others were prey.

During the winter of 1883-84, Percival Lowell, an American temporarily residing in Seoul, described the large black vultures flying over the city as "the scavengers of the town" and that they shared this "disagreeable duty with the dogs." He further wrote:

"Though no one would think of molesting them, they rarely descend to the streets, except on sudden swoops; and the houses are so low that they seldom roost on the roofs. They select from preference the trees, of which there are many in the gardens that lie scattered through the city. Wherever there happens to be a group of these, [the vultures] congregate, and at dusk the branches will be covered thick with birds perching on them."











Although they are no longer seen in Seoul, they can still be found in the DMZ area – especially in the Hwapo Cheon Wetlands.



The falconry school in Daejeon. February 2015



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Park wrapped up in the wings of a golden eagle. February 2015.

In the past, falconry was once very popular in Seoul. Eungbong (also known as Maebong) Mountain, near the Han River, was frequented by Joseon noblemen who hunted pheasants and other birds using hawks. The mountain is said to resemble a falcon or hawk, giving it its name: the Chinese character for falcon is pronounced as "eung" in Korean and "mae" means hawk.

Sadly, those days are gone, at least in Seoul, but Korean falconry can still be witnessed in Daejeon where master falconer Park Yong-soon (named as an intangible cultural asset), instructs a small number of potential falconers at his school.



Park prepares to send his bird into flight. February 2015

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It is no easy task to become a licensed falconer, which explains why there were only 10 of them in 2015. It requires several years of apprenticeship and the successful passing of a test administered by the Korean Culture Heritage Administration.

John Mathews, an American who attended a falconry demonstration in 2015, said:

"Korean falconers adorn themselves with a traditional honor that isn't present in the West. The methods have been passed down for generations and it is rich with cultural tradition. I loved seeing the cultural flair that the Korean falconers put into their appearances. Their hats and tunics paid tribute to their roots."

Korean falconry is a tradition from the past that should be protected for the future.

(I would like to thank Jeon Dong-hun for his assistance.)



Choi Dong-gyu displays a young northern goshawk during a falconry demonstration in Daejeon in February 2015.



A red shi ch'i mi (owner's identification tag) can be seen on the northern goshawk Choi is holding. A Korean idiom owes its origin to this tag. In the past, thieves would steal the birds and replace their tags with their own. Later, if they were caught, they would claim they did not know the bird had been owned, thus shi ch'i mi tte da (remove the tag) means to feign ignorance. February 2015



Jang Seong-gap, an apprentice at the time, displays his hunter. February 2015



One of the hunters surveying the audience. February 2015

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