

# Opinion

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## Korea's regents of the sky: Part 1

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Master Falconer Park Yong-soon with a golden eagle in February 2015 / Robert Neff Collection

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,” declared a writer in the early 1920s.

While it is true that in the 1920s, the Korean Peninsula was plagued with wolves (the newspapers in Korea often reported [fatal wolf encounters](#) — usually the victims were children and women), aside from the above, I have not come across any references to trained eagles being used to hunt wolves on the peninsula.

According to the unnamed writer, there was “an immense isolated rock of black basalt” off the southwest coast of Korea that was used as a preserve for raising eagles. These eagles were then trained and used by the Joseon monarchs to hunt deer and wolves.

The author claimed the Korean sea-eagles were only smaller than their cousin, the Steller’s sea eagles, and had very dark plumage that became black as they aged and their beaks were nearly white.

An even earlier article from the 1890s by Dr. H. Bolau described the Korean sea eagle as being rarer than the Steller’s sea eagle and also notes that it is completely black with a hint of brown, except its tail. “The powerful beaks of these birds are remarkable, not only for their size and strength, and for the hook-like curve of the upper mandible, but especially for the beautiful light lemon color, which distinguishes them from the beaks of all other birds of prey.”



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A tethered hunter surveys his domain in Daejeon in February 2015. Robert Neff Collection

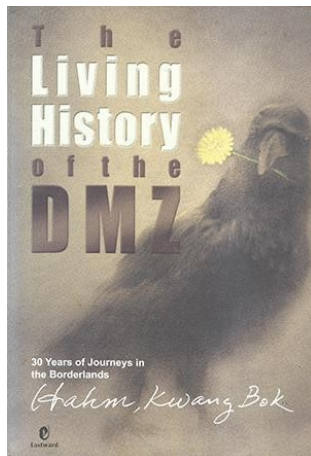
In 1888, the zoological garden in Warsaw announced that it had received its first Korean sea eagle skin. Warsaw's zoological garden's claim to fame was soon usurped in 1892 when Captain Dethlefsen, who formerly commanded a steamship chartered by the Korean government, presented the zoological garden in Hamburg with a live Korean sea eagle. It joined a Steller's sea eagle which had been presented to the garden in the same year by another ship's captain.

According to Bolau, "In captivity, the sea eagles are very quiet, generally keeping away from the other birds in the cage. Their food consists of fish and meat. Their sharp, penetrating cry is as powerful as their bodies, and, in their native land, can be heard above the noise of storm and surf."

Seals and fish were not the only things on the Korean sea eagle's menu. On April 16, 1908, a group of Korean sailors witnessed "an extraordinarily large eagle ... alight on the western shore of [Wolmi Island — now part of Incheon]." After a short time, the giant bird once again took to the sky but appeared to be somewhat burdened by the weight of its prey which it clutched tightly in its talons. The sailors followed the giant eagle to a nearby island and "to their gratification, found the eagle ripping apart a large pig. Although it is not stated in the article, I am assuming the eagle did not get to enjoy its pork dinner.

Occasionally, the regents of the sky added the regents of the mountains to their menu. On May 31, 1896, Sally Sill, the wife of the American ambassador to Korea, wrote:

"This has been a lovely day. In the afternoon we all went as usual to the Russian legation for afternoon tea and there we saw a young tiger that the King had presented to [Mr. Carl von Waeber — the Russian representative to Korea.] Some Korean peasants in the northern part of the country were out walking and saw two large eagles, each with a tiger's cub in his mouth or rather talons, and the Father and Mother tigers following after them. They then found the cave and in it one little tiger left. They secured it and brought it to the King, he, not caring for it, gave it to Mr. Waeber, who is going to send it to Russia to have it put in one of the zoological gardens there. It is the queerest looking little thing I ever saw, as large as a good sized cat, but with enormous claws and head, and most wicked looking eyes."



Hahm Kwang-bok's "The Living History of the DMZ" / Eastward Publishing Company

Korea's regents of the sky: Part 2

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Until this little tiger was transported to Russia, it served as a popular conversation topic at the Russian legation and was the subject of numerous accounts detailing visits to the legation. Sadly, Waeber does not appear to have written anything about the little tiger and its ultimate fate is unknown.

While eagles were portrayed majestically, the black vulture (Cinereous vulture) enjoyed a less

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prestigious characterization. During the winter of 1883-84, Percival Lowell, an American temporarily residing in Seoul, noticed them soaring over Seoul and described them as "the scavengers of the town" that shared this "disagreeable duty with the dogs."

"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."

For the most part, these great birds escaped the attention of early Western writers. However, just over a century later, they served as a reminder of the harshness of the Korean Peninsula's division. In his book, "The Living History of the DMZ," Hahm Kwang-bok described the winter of 1993-94 as "the season of falling vultures." Almost daily, these large vultures crashed to the ground in the DMZ area. Many people believed the birds may have inadvertently eaten poisoned pheasants or deer but it wasn't because of what they ate — rather it was because they had not eaten.

North Korea was suffering from a severe famine and there was little food to be found — even for the black vultures. According to Hahm: "The vultures first flew from Mongolia to North Korea but they have to come further south across the DMZ because they could not find anything to eat there."

People living in the area did all they could to help the starving birds: soldiers provided frozen chickens and fish, one photographer bought 12,000 won's worth of chicken daily to feed them, while others rescued them from wire fences and other obstacles. The crows, however, were not so charitable and would not leave the haggard vultures alone:

"They chased the vultures away by attacking them in groups in the sky. Vultures that were not able to escape from the crows writhed in pain due to their broken wings. Vultures that weren't found by people early enough verged on freezing to death."

Many of the vultures survived and over the past couple of decades, the number of vultures visiting South Korea has greatly increased. But not the same can be said for North Korea. In 2016, Korea JoongAng Daily reported that "vultures shun barren North Korea." Lee Han-su (head of the Korea Ecology Environment Institute) told the newspaper that the vultures passed over the northern part of the peninsula "because in North Korea the vultures can barely find animal corpses which are major food resources for them."

In the introduction of his book, Hahm explained that he went to the DMZ searching for the "thick green woods" but what he discovered was "not an ideal vision of nature."

"The natural world was weathered, tired of man's endless fights and adapted itself to the changes brought by human beings," he said.

Fortunately, the black vultures seem to have adapted.

My appreciation to Diane Nars for her assistance.

*Robert Neff has authored and co-authored several books, including "Letters from Joseon," "Korea Through Western Eyes" and "Brief Encounters."*

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