

## South Korea, February 2023



*Oscar Campbell*

This short trip report details an independently organised trip to South Korea for a week in February 2023. As this country is still rather poorly covered by independent trip reports, there will hopefully be some useful information presented here that encourages others to go and sample the terrific birding of South Korea, a very friendly, well-organised place that is easy to get around.

### Overview

This was a visit of only a week, based on available school holidays and some knock-down prices that we were able to get on flights. A week was definitely not long enough to comprehensively sample the excellent Korean birding on offer, especially given that, for a few days, birding was not the main objective. Even so, the trip was well worthwhile and it was possible, with some fore-planning, to sample three major and varied sites (Season Lakes and the Geum river barrage, halfway down the west coast, Sokcho to Deojin on the far northeast coast and the Cheorwan basin and nearby CCZ/DMZ area to the north of Seoul, each for more or less a full day). I also fitted in a bit of casual birding around Seoul and the tourist spots of Jeonju and Suwan, plus two short looks at Oida, on the outer edge of Songdo intertidal area, en-route to and from the international airport. In all 100 species were recorded, but given that these included five species of **cranes**, both **Steller's Sea** and **White-tailed Eagles**, nine flavours of **gulls**, tasty passerines such as **Siberian Accentor**, **Long-tailed Rosefinch** and some nice wintering **buntings** and **thrushes**, it was certainly quality over quantity. A summary of sightings including a systematic list is at my eBird [trip report](#).

### Logistics

**1 Stuff to bring** Firstly be sure to go online at least a few days before travel to get a [Korean ETA](#); this was easy, cheap and arrived within 24 hrs. It might be requested at the airport check-in. An international driving licence was vital for renting a car (see below). For some reason, we failed to get money out of Korean ATMs

using any of several debit and credit cards (all with UAE banks) that we brought, but those same cards did work virtually everywhere else for direct transactions. Luckily we had bought about 400 USD worth of Korean Won from the airport before flying, this was used for small transactions. We brought lots of warm clothes – it was sub-zero every night and mostly sub +5°C most of the day, even in the sun. We had some murky haze at times but no rain nor fog and little wind; perfect conditions most of the time. Hot water flasks and travel mugs were useful for sustenance and keeping warm; getting boiling water was easy. Mark Brazil's *Birds of East Asia* is the only field guide needed and all the birding hotspots are on eBird, which seemed to be fairly well used. Given lots of shoreline, lakes and open country, a scope was essential and continuously used.

**2 Accommodation** This was all booked in advance via [www.booking.com](http://www.booking.com). Advance reservations were not necessary; there are loads of places to stay in Korea but we liked the idea of not having to spend time thinking or working stuff out on the road. Everywhere was easy to find (via a combination of the car's in-built sat nav and Maps.me, pins inserted at the time of booking), comfortable, had loads of hot water and was run by friendly people who spoke at least a few words of English. None offered breakfast, at least not automatically and all were warm (sometimes too warm) despite the cold night temperatures.

We spent one night in each of the following, all of which were clearly marked on Maps.me:

- **Central Seoul** – [Seoul Station R Guesthouse](#) – This was chosen on the basis of being a few minutes walk and very easy to find from Seoul Central Station, where the express train from Incheon International Airport arrives. From here, we could walk to Naman and also hop onto the easy-to-use metro next morning to go to tourist sites such as Bukchon Hanok and the nearby palaces.
- **Seosan** – [Vovo Hotel](#) Nice, comfy place; just an overnight stop as we left early next morning to get to Seosan Lakes (45min drive away) for soon after first light.
- **Jeonju** – [Hanok Dream](#) This was a proper, traditional Korean hanok, right in the middle of a traditional village that is now surrounded by a fairly large city. The room was very traditional (i.e. rather sparse, but with heated floors). More worryingly, there were rather thin futon-like mattresses to sleep on. However, surprisingly, no back problems resulted and it made getting up early for a chilly but worthwhile birding walk along the nearby river next morning a pretty easy decision.
- **Sokcho** – [Mark Sokcho Residence Hotel](#) – Large tower block of apartments, with a crazy way of stacking cars for the parking lot. The initial room they gave us had not been cleaned from the previous occupant but they were very apologetic and we got a upgrade as a result. Good birding lakes and harbour within 5–10 mins.
- **Near Cheorwan** – [Hanhwa Resort, Seojong Lake](#) – A large resort; this was the closest place we could find on [www.booking.com](http://www.booking.com) to the Cheorwan area (which was about 20 mins further north).
- **Suwon** – [Suwon Dono 1796](#) – Reasonable hotel where the receptionist spoke excellent English, very close to the fortress walls which we walked round the next morning.



**3 Getting around** We rented a car for five days from Incheon International airport. This was done via [Lotte Rent A Car](#), who have an English website; booking was very simple. Signing up as a 'member' before booking was easy and gave a good reduction on the price. Their desk was easy to find at the airport and they were efficient and helpful. We had a Kia K3, which was very comfortable to drive; high clearance was never required. We paid for full insurance and the top of the range sat-nav (carefully set to English on request before we left) came as standard. A valid international driving permit was essential and checked right at the start. Overall, these guys were way better and easier to deal with than the general average for car rental companies.

In general, driving was easy enough. Maps.me worked most of the time, more or less but sometimes took an age to plan a route and we mainly relied on the in-built sat-nav. It was as clear as a bell and gave lots of warning of things like speed cameras (which are abundant) and lots of details on how to navigate tricky junctions, of which there were also quite a few. The only issue was programming it to find specific hotels; the address search function did not work for all. Traffic was not bad overall and most drivers were at least semi-competent. We did not attempt to drive into or out of Seoul, instead getting the train in the day we arrived and back out 24 hours later to pick up the car. We had quite heavy traffic on the northeastern outskirts of Seoul as we skirted round from the Cheorwan area via the Paldang bridge to get to Suwon and then a lot more traffic jams to get into Suwon; this was on a Friday evening. Suwon was a pretty easy and mostly traffic-jam free drive back to the airport (c1hr:15min), at least on a Saturday afternoon. We had some fun at tolls, which were also rather frequent, although not totally exorbitant. It was rarely clear which lane to use to and then when / if to take a ticket on entering the toll. However, the toll-gate staff at the exit seem well aware of this and somehow could easily work out where we had got on and asked for the appropriate fare (which the sat-nav had already predicted). For the last few days, we snapped an image of the entry toll gate name as we arrived and then showed this image at the exit when we left; this helped but was probably not essential.

Taking the train from the international airport and back again was easy, fast and pretty cheap. The same goes for the city centre metro.

**3 Food** There is pretty good food to be had in Korea; the problem is accessing it with zero Korean. Another problem is that most establishments shut down pretty early (from 1900) so you cannot rely on birding all day and then rocking up at the accommodation at about 8pm and easily finding grub. We got round this by stopping in large highway service stations, where there were loads of options to choose from, including, in nearly all, a large central plaza with three or four canteen-style restaurants serving the basics i.e. hot ramen and udon noodles in soup, various rice, cutlets, the inevitable kimchi etc. You choose which dish you want by going to the electronic kiosk and flicking through the images; then insert cash or a card to seal the order; the food appears over the counter of the relevant restaurant a few minutes later. This worked out pretty well and was always good value; copious supplies of Werther's originals and snack bars filled the gaps.

**4 Other resources** There are not many independent trip reports for Korea (in fact, not many trip reports period for the country) available on [Cloudbirders](#) but [this one](#) is extremely useful and detailed; it and eBird helped a lot in planning specific areas to visit. As noted above, my summary [trip report](#) with a species list is on eBird and a small number of sound recordings made on this trip are deposited on [Xeno-Canto](#).

**5 Birding and weather** Both were really good. Having travelled fairly extensively through Japan and done several trips to China and one to Mongolia, I was in the enviable position of there been hardly any new birds to target. I also have the handy mindset of not worrying too much about birds I haven't seen, so my failure to find Relict Gull didn't really matter. However, if I hadn't been to places such as eastern Hokkaido, and Po-Yang Lake, China, Korean winter birding would have seemed beyond sensational. With more time, getting as far as Busan would have been the way to go, both for Relict Gull and some great wetlands but this would have required at least two more full days. Despite not getting there, a lot was crammed into a week (possible, as distances are not too far on the whole; the longest drive we had, from Jeonju to Sokcho

was completed late afternoon and took about 5 hrs). It can get pretty cold and snowy in South Korea in the winter. However, we were lucky to have mostly clear skies and little or no wind every day. It was a bit dull and flat around Seoul and Suwon but never foggy. It was cold at night, but not seriously cold; only once did we have to de-ice the windscreen in the morning. Only from Sokcho northwards did we see snow on the horizon hills and, to a lesser extent, on the ground. None was recent however, and the roads totally clear and easy to drive everywhere. Despite the lack of snow and proper icy conditions (although most lakes from Sokcho north were well frozen), all wintering birds were still more or less in place. The highlights and some specific details are mentioned below; species such as common western European waterfowl, **Eastern Spotbill**, **Rufous Turtle Dove**, **Great Cormorant**, **Grey Heron**, **Great Egret**, **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**, **Eastern Buzzard**, common **corvids**, **Japanese Tit**, **Brown-eared Bulbul** and **Yellow-throated Bunting**, all of which are common to fairly common and easy to find, are generally not discussed further.

## **Birding - 1 Main sites**

### **A1 - Seosan Lakes area (c45 min south from Seosan city)**

We concentrated on the Seosan Lake A general area, scanning from the elevated, tarred track that runs along the eastern side and exploring various side tracks; we went right up to the north side and crossed the bridge in the middle of the lake to the west side as well. The vast lake was ice-free but the sunny fields on reclaimed land, and the ditches and small canals



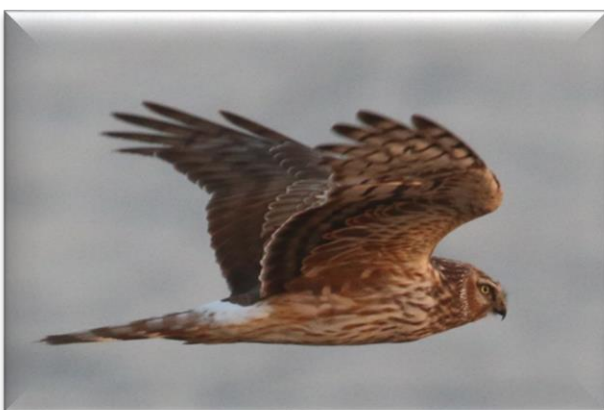
were partly frozen. Access was easy at [36.594200, 126.464666](#), from where the network of tracks could be traversed to the main lakeside track. Nearly seven hours was spent here, picking through the numerous **White-fronted** and **Bean Geese** flocks (latter seemingly all **Tundra**, distinctions vs Taiga are far more subtle than they are in western Europe) and watching the **Hooded Cranes**, which mainly fed in the environs of [36.631654, 126.479532](#). It was well worth picking through these as on the return we found a particularly large flock close to the main track that held two **Sandhill Cranes**, **Common Crane** and at least one **Hooded x Common Crane hybrid**. The other star birds here were **Oriental Stork**, a group of 24 being present in wet fields not far north of the cranes and **Saunders's Gull**, with a tight flock on the main lake near the south end soon after arrival. Starting with **Short-eared Owl** as we arrived, birding was superb generally, with a large flock of **Greater Scaup** and a scattering of **Smew** on the main lake, at least 14 **Black Vultures** soaring together to the north, at least six **White-tailed Eagles**, **Meadow Buntings** and, after a lot of staring, nice views of **Pallas's Reed Buntings** along a frozen drain, with **Yellow-throated Bunting** and a flock of **Vinous-throated Parrotbill** skitting round on the ice in close proximity. Chinese Penduline Tit was likely heard but not seen. We went for some late lunch to the café and craft brewery at Cheonsu Bay just over the bridge, from where the shoreline could be scoped, although the afternoon light was not great.





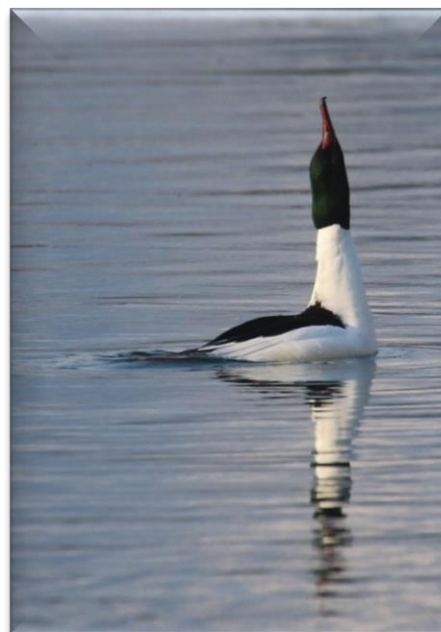
## A2 - Geum River Barrage (c1 hr south from Seosan Lakes)

This site was visited in the second half of the afternoon, after hot-footing down from Seosan. With limited time and potentially a very big area to cover, we concentrated on the north shore, starting at [36.036877, 126.779117](#). From here, we scanned the river and walked west, before returning to the car and driving westwards on the nearest small road, taking various raised tracks (narrow but all properly surfaced) down to the river, getting as far as about [36.052420, 126.827640](#). A raised cycle path along the bank allows easy access on foot. Bird numbers were a lot lower than at Seosan and there was barely a sniff of half a million **Baikal Teal**; eventually we saw a few smallish groups by scoping distantly along the south shore and, eventually, a good bit closer, along the north shore near where finally we ran out of light. To be honest, views of Baikal Teal were much better in the crane river at Cheorwan than here. Still, it was a good winter afternoon; most of the **Bean Geese** were **Taiga**, which was instructive and we also had a great close flyby from a ringtail **Hen Harrier** hunting **Eurasian Skylarks**. A rather nice selection of passerines included the first **Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker** and **Olive-backed Pipits**, and only **Warbling White-eye**, of the trip, and fine examples of male **Naumann's Thrush** and **Daurian Redstart**. There is probably much more that could be found here with more time and, with hindsight, viewing the shoreline from the south side below the barrage would have been productive too, possibly even with an outside chance of Relict Gull.



### B Far northeast coast – Sokcho to Deojin (c45min north)

This is Hokkaido lite – infinite fresh air and coastline views with masses of wintering gulls, seafowl and, in the other direction the backdrop of wintry forests, frozen lakes and distant snowy hills. However, there was a lot less immediate snow close at hand, not to mention alcids and eagles... Anyway, starting at Sokcho, there are multiple good birding sites running north from there as far as about [38.543790, 128.404997](#) – from a few km north of this spot (which is basically a surfing beach albeit with half the beach closed off by razor wire and with army posts on all the high ground) the CCZ zone starts. It is not possible to enter the CCZ without first registering (exactly where was not clear) so we got turned round here and failed to visit the DMZ Museum and Unification observatory, although we put this right at Cheorwan next day.



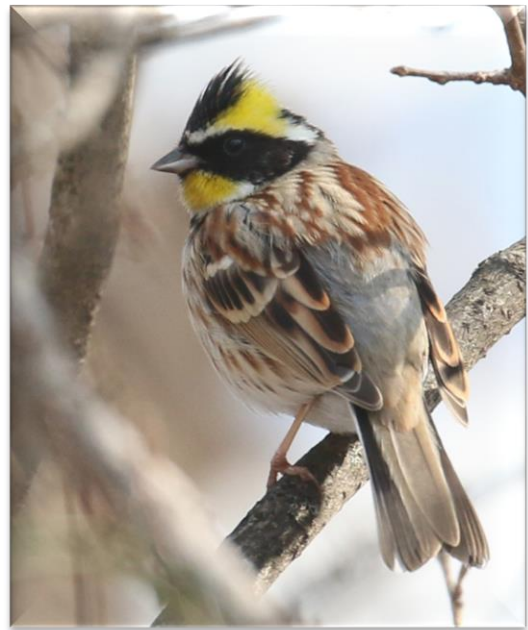
First birding slot, from dawn, was a few rather cold hours very close to Sokcho, visiting Yeongnang Lake (nearly all frozen, so I concentrated on the outflow to the harbour and the harbour and open coastline itself) and, just to the south, Cheongcho Lake. The latter is essentially Sokcho Harbour and was the only local lake not frozen; light and birds were great here from the southwest corner. There was a reasonable mix of wildfowl, including **Greater Scaup**, **Smew** and **Goosander**, four species of **grebes** (mainly in the harbour or offshore) and gulls, which were mainly **Black-tailed**, **Common kamtschatschensis** and **Vega**. A terrific adult **White-tailed Eagle** flew over and **Dusky Thrush** and **Hawfinch** were easy to enjoy feeding very openly on the edge of the snow.

We then checked out and headed north, starting at Geojin Harbour (c40 mins north of Sokcho) and the nearby headland, then anywhere that looked good on the seaward and inland side of Hwajinpo Lake and finally up to Deajin Harbour and a bit further on. This was all covered comfortably in about 5-6 hours. Most time was spent on the beaches, harbours and scanning out to sea; gull numbers were good but not overwhelming; with some time and patience I pulled out a few good examples of **Mongolian Gulls** amidst the **Vega** and quite a few **Slaty-backed**, mainly at Deajin. By far the commonest species were **Black-tailed** and **Common**, all of which seemed to be *kamtschatschensis* (no *henei* recorded for sure). Scanning offshore produced very large numbers of **grebes**, **Mergansers** and, in a few places, a few small groups of **Harlequins**. **Divers** (Black-throated or Pacific) were common but just too far out to pin down for certain but the lack of any alcids or scoters (maybe both weather dependent?) was a bit disappointing. These sort of things looked possible anywhere, but the viewpoint on the dramatic headland at Geojin (at [38.449968, 128.468094](#)) was surely the best place to look. **Pelagic Cormorants** were abundant here, with a few **Japanese Cormorant** present as well.





In the rather cold, wintery conditions, passerines were generally scarce but a sunny bank at Hwajinpo Lake (at [38.465893, 128.443751](#)) produced a small group of **Yellow-throated Buntings** and two associating **Long-tailed Rosefinch**. The woodland and frozen lake edge by the nearby President's Cottage yielded **Nauman's Thrush** and the only **Bull-headed Shrike** of the trip. However, beating all of those, and the **Blue Rock Thrush** in the harbour nearby, was the discovery of two **Siberian Accentors** feeding quietly on the *sasa*-edged track below the lighthouse at Daejin – at about [38.503202, 128.427746](#).



### C - Cheorwan Basin and CCZ/DMZ areas

Prior to our visit we had very little information about how to access this area, or even if it was possible at all. Having been turned back at the CCZ boundary north of Daejin the day before, we spent some time that night researching how to access the area at Cheorwan. Neither online information nor Lonely Planet was particularly helpful. In the end, we left the hotel fairly early and drove up to the 'Iron Triangle' ([38.185500, 127.297461](#)), arriving there at 0830. There is an information centre there and, I think, bus tours to the CCZ and DMZ depart but not tours for independent travellers with cars. However, the staff at the information centre were helpful and directed us to [38.266712, 127.281782](#), another 10 mins up the road (or 30 if you stop to watch the regular parties of **cranes** that soon started to appear...) where there is a visitor centre with some information on the natural history of the area. This was encouraging, there are quite a few eBird

locations in this general area and we arrived to find the whole set-up perfect; a very helpful lady was expecting us (the guys at the Iron Triangle had phoned ahead) and she quickly had us signed up for a tour of the CCZ. This departed at



1000 and involved a small convoy of cars following a local guide who had the paper work to get us in and out of the CCZ. The whole thing was amazingly cheap (c5 USD per person and a passport copy) and well worth two hours; we saw a couple of key sites in the CCZ, including spending about 30 mins peering into the desolate and eerie DMZ proper from the elevated observatory, watching **White-fronted Geese** and a **White-tailed Eagle** flying over the wooded plains and crossing the North Korean watchpoints. Much of the CCZ is under cultivation (apart from the bits that are mine fields...) and it was not possible to wander around unaccompanied. However, the large numbers of **cranes**, both **Red-crowned** and **White-naped** were unmissable. Back outside the CCZ by 1200, we ended at the well-known Worker's Party Headquarters, from where we were then free to explore anywhere we wanted between there and the visitor centre. Woodland behind the Worker's Party HQ and at the visitor centre produced plenty of **tits** and some **buntings** (mainly **Rustic**), plus **Naumann's Thrush** and **Long-tailed Rosefinch**, whilst scanning the area generally produced the likes of **Hen Harrier**, distant **Black Vultures** and another **White-tailed Eagle**. One place not to be missed is the Han River viewpoint just a little way south and east of the visitor centre; we noted swans dropping in and viewed from about [38.275724](#), [127.314726](#), but there seemed to be a large viewing centre (not signed and seemingly not opened) just to the west. Anyway, even mid-afternoon we had a magical 45 mins here, with good numbers of both species of **crane** in the shallows and flying over, joined by **Whooper Swans** and a nice range of ducks, including **Smew** and 25 **Baikal Teals**, mainly males giving fine views. Overall, our day at Cheorwan was one of the most interesting of the trip, both in terms of birds and general tourism; highly recommended.





## D - Paldang Bridge, Han River on east edge of Seoul

This is well-known as a rather reliable site for **Steller's Sea Eagle**, otherwise a very localised winter visitor. Having spent some time in eastern Hokkaido, including two shifts on the Rausu ice-breaker, this species was not a priority but, having to pass close by en-route from Cheorwan to Suwon, it didn't take much thought to make a minor diversion for one of the worlds' most awesome birds. The alternative, Solitary Snipe at the national arboretum, just didn't have the same appeal. The journey from Cheorwan to Paldang took longer than expected, due to heavy traffic on the outskirts of Seoul on a Friday afternoon, the bit where the #47 meets the #100 and the stretch leading down to the north side of the Han river being particularly snarled up. By all accounts this is par for the course. I also had the problem of not knowing exactly where to park up and scan from so, on a whim tried immediately west of the Paldang bridge at [37.550194, 127.238125](#) and then a bit further along (east) at [37.540455, 127.254299](#), in the garden of the rather nice restaurant situated there. There is a small road that follows the north shore of the river, and unlike the #6 immediately behind and above, stopping and scanning is possible. The first stop produced a lot of **Whooper Swans** and other waterfowl and an immediate **White-tailed Eagle** on a protruding rock mid-river but there was rather less evident from the second spot. However, 20 mins of scanning eventually produced a fine adult (or near adult) **Stellers's Sea Eagle** flying upstream, and then settling rather distantly to roost on trees on the hillside on the south side. Even at a km or more in fading late afternoon light, this was a magnificent predator, although inevitably, the setting, whilst dramatic enough, was not a patch on Hokkaido. Of additional interest were lots of **Taiga Bean Geese** flying out to feed over the forested ridges and particularly large numbers of **Goldeneye** (c300). More time would surely have produced a lot more but it was now nearly 6pm; however, in all a well spent hour.

## 2 Other places

### A - Inner city Seoul (Namsan Mountain Park, Gyeongbok Palace & nearby Bukchon Hanok)

We walked up the hill of Namsan, very close to Seoul central station, soon after arriving, by which point it was a very still but flat, grey late winter afternoon. **Yellow-throated Bunting** was the only real result, although the habitat looked quite good and a morning visit would surely produce more. The following morning we visited the well-known tourist sites of Bukchon Hanok and nearly adjacent Gyeongbok Palace, which were pleasant on a cold winter's morning. Quite a few **thrushes**, both **Dusky** and **Naumann's** were about but flighty, some finally giving good views. The first **Daurian Redstart** and **Brambling** of the trip were noted too.

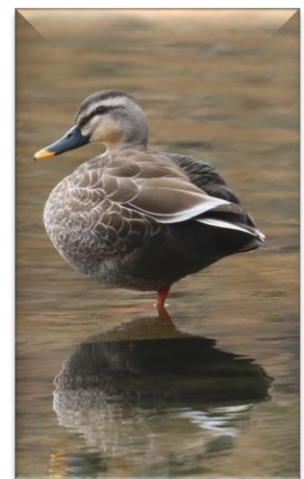
### B - Oida fish harbour / outer Songdo mudflats (c45mins from Incheon airport)

Two stops were made here, en-route from and to Incheon airport. The port is about 20 mins from the main airport highway. This was due to a recent record of Relict Gull (early January 2023); there are scattered eBird records of this species in the greater Songdo area over many years and Oida is a fairly accessible place to look – and isn't a complete concrete jungle. Our visits were on a Sunday afternoon and Saturday lunchtime, both busy times with limited parking available. The first visit coincided with low tide and very large numbers of gulls, mainly **Black-tailed**, although single **Slaty-backed**, **Glaucous** and **Lesser Black Backed Gull** *taimyrensis* were also present. However, small gulls were almost non-existent and Relict Gull was 100% absent. Gull numbers were much lower on a high tide (second visit). Further out were small numbers of **Great Crested Grebe**, **Red-breasted Merganser** and the only **Common Shelduck** of the trip whilst a limited number of waders were mainly **Eurasian Curlew**.



### C - Jeonju (Hanok area and along river on south edge of Hanok to Martyr's Tombs)

This was a really pleasant place to visit; green and quite birdy, and there was quite a lot to see in the hanok area of Jeonju. Of most (bird) interest was the short walk along the river to the Martyr's Tombs area to the east, which are situated on low hills of dry woodland above the river which was completed early morning and then again, with the camera, early afternoon. In between we wandered around the hanok and spent some time in the grounds of Gyeonggijeon (**Naumann's Thrush** seen very well) and Omokdae (only **Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker** of the trip; really quite different from the more numerous Japanese). Other birds included **Grey-headed** and **Great Spotted Woodpeckers** and **Eurasian Jay**, all in the woodland near the tombs, where **Varied Tit** also showed up, and very nice views of **Japanese Wagtail** (river) and **Yellow-billed Grosbeak** (clearly common locally, including groups over Gyeonggijeon). **Azure-winged Magpie** were particularly common and species such as **Olive-backed Pipit**, **Daurian Redstart**, **Dusky Thrush** and quite a few **Red-billed Starlings** (not mapped for anywhere near Korea in the field guide but clearly well-established here) added to the general interest.



### D Suwon (Fortress walls walk)

We stopped in the city of Suwon mainly because it was a handy and interesting place to stay before heading to the airport for a late afternoon flight out. It actually proved a good choice, with, like Jeonju, some proper history and a lot of time outdoors. We completed the c6km loop walk round the fortress walls in about 2½ hrs; birds were incidental and rather sparse (25 species in all). **Eurasian Hoopoe** was the only trip addition; others included the usual wild and wary scattering of **Dusky** and **Naumann's Thrushes**, **Daurian Redstart**, **Olive-backed Pipit** and great views of **Hawfinch**, with **Marsh** and **Long-tailed Tit** also rather common.