

# A Winter Klean-up in Korea

A report on a birding trip by Richard Thomas (BirdingBricker@gmail.com) and Sarah Thomas

This report covers a two week trip myself and my wife Sarah undertook to South Korea from 14–28th February 2023. It followed a hugely successful winter trip to Japan in 2019 where we had seen the majority of the regional specialities available during that season. Our South Korea trip was heavily focused on nine “missing” regional target species, namely: Swan Goose, Scaly-sided Merganser, Baikal Teal, Oriental Stork, Relict Gull, Chinese Grey Shrike, Pallas's Rosefinch, Ochre-rumped Bunting, and Pallas's Reed Bunting. Once again we were very successful, recording all the target species plus many additional good birds, the majority of which we had previously seen in Japan. They included: Harlequin Duck, 5 crane species, Solitary Snipe, Saunders's Gull, Slaty-backed Gull, Steller's Eagle, Daurian Jackdaw, Siberian Accentor, and Yellow-throated Bunting. (The last of these is very common in South Korea). As we'd previously seen them in Japan, we didn't make a special effort to look for Japanese Waxwing, Asian Rosy-finch or Grey Bunting. Like Japan, the first of these is irregular in occurrence and is seen more often in late winter. During our visit three were reported associating with Bohemian Waxwings in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and may have been twitchable. The second appears to be a very scarce inland visitor to South Korea. eBird reports could help you out with this and the last species.

## Planning

Special thanks go to Vivian Fu, Justin Lee, and Richard Webb for help with planning this trip. Also to the many contributors to eBird and to the writers of three reports in particular:

Petri Hottola for his superb 2014 report that really set the standard for independent birding in South Korea and is available at: <https://www.club300.se/media/9467/skorea14.pdf>

Richard Webb, for his excellent 2019 report on birding in the country—which has the added advantage over Hottola's report in including GPS co-ordinates to birding sites and is available at: [https://www.cloudbirders.com/be/download?filename=WEBB\\_SouthKorea\\_0203\\_2019.pdf](https://www.cloudbirders.com/be/download?filename=WEBB_SouthKorea_0203_2019.pdf)

Finally, to Mark Piper and crew, who visited South Korea in late 2022 and thus had information highly relevant to our visit in early 2023.

For a field guide we simply used Mark Brazil's *Birds of Japan* backed up with online resources. Tapes weren't needed for this trip but we had downloaded the Merlin app which includes sounds should they be useful. Very useful for gull identification were two articles on the Birds Korea website:

[http://www.birdskorea.org/Birds/Identification/ID\\_Notes/BK-ID-Gull-status.shtml](http://www.birdskorea.org/Birds/Identification/ID_Notes/BK-ID-Gull-status.shtml) and

[http://www.birdskorea.org/Birds/Identification/ID\\_Notes/BK-ID-Herring-Gull-Page1.shtml](http://www.birdskorea.org/Birds/Identification/ID_Notes/BK-ID-Herring-Gull-Page1.shtml)

## Paperwork

UK visitors to South Korea should apply in advance (with payment of a small fee) for Korean Electronic Authorization (K-ETA) approval: <https://www.k-eta.go.kr/portal/apply/index.do>

This is a straightforward process and means no visa is needed for entry into the country. Although we printed ours out, we were never asked to show it and it appears it was already linked electronically to our passport number. Approval arrived within 24 hours of our application.

At the time of our visit, a COVID-related health declaration was also mandatory. This could only be applied for within 72 hours of travelling and was available from: <https://cov19ent.kdca.go.kr/cpassportal/biz/beffatstmnt/main.do?lang=en>.

Clearly requirements could change at any time: when we visited, anyone visiting from or transiting through China had to produce evidence of a recent negative COVID test for example. Again, although we printed out our health declarations, we were never asked to show them and it appears it was already linked electronically to our passport number. The wearing of facemasks was mandatory on all public transport and in public buildings during the time of our visit.

An International Driving Permit stamped as valid for category B vehicles is essential or you will not be allowed to hire a car. In the UK these are readily available from major Post Offices and valid from one year from date of issue.

### **Flights**

We flew direct from Heathrow to Seoul with Asiana airlines for £758 each return. The outbound flight was half empty so we were able to lie down and sleep across three adjacent seats for much of it. The online entertainment was somewhat limited although I did catch up with Casablanca, a film I hadn't watched for years. The wearing of a facemask was mandatory during the flight.

### **Money**

The unit of currency is the Korean Won (KRW). At the time of our visit there were just under KRW1,500 to the pound. We changed GBP400 in cash at the airport (check the various money changers in the Arrivals hall as some gave better rates than others). Credit cards were also widely accepted and we generally paid for accommodation with the latter and other living expenses with cash. ATMs were also widely available. We saw them at the airport and at e.g. Seoul Central Station.

### **Car hire and driving**

All sites were readily accessible in a regular vehicle and, at the time of our visit at least, there was no need for snow chains. There only appeared to be two car companies with booths at Incheon Airport: Lotte and SK (associated with Hertz and Avis respectively). The website of the latter was only in Korean, and despite the assistance of Google translate I was unable to fathom the booking system. Consequently we went with Lotte, which had a ponderous English language version of its website (<https://www.lotterentacar.net/hp/eng/reservation/index.do>) and required you to become a Lotte Member in order to secure a 40% discount on your booking. Having done so, you are assigned a Lotte email address with the domain @lotte.net. Confirmation of your booking is automatically sent there—but I have no idea how to access the account. Consequently, I emailed engreserve@lotte.net to receive confirmation that I had both paid for the car (£475 for 10 days) and to pick it up I would need my International Driving Permit, the credit card under which I had booked the car and my passport.

Paying for fully comprehensive insurance with zero excess for the collision damage waiver appeared to be a requirement, although I was planning to do so anyway. One oddity in the small print was that in the event of an accident—regardless of blame—you are still liable to pay half the daily rental fee for the number of days it takes to repair the car before it can be hired out again: a means for Lotte to cover their loss of profit for a vehicle out of action.

As we arrived late in the afternoon on 14th February we chose to overnight it near the airport and pick the car up the following morning. This made for a late start the next day given the Lotte desk in Terminal 1 only opens at 09:00 (although when returning the car on 26th February the desk was open at 08:30).

Driving in South Korea is generally OK if you're careful. Over- and under-taking is allowed and you will doubtless have cars speeding up both sides of you so beware. Generally drivers are very impatient and will rapidly, often with little or no warning, change lanes right in front of you. Turning right on red lights appeared to be permitted at least some of the time. We did encounter several roundabouts,

fortunately none of them terribly busy, where as far as we could work out, traffic already on the roundabout has to give way to vehicles entering it i.e. contrary to road rules in the UK. There are many traffic lights on all non-highways (although nowhere nearly as many as in Japan!); usually left turns have a dedicated left turn signal to do so.

We picked the car up with a 3/4 full tank and were told to return it that way. Note that many of the petrol stations in South Korea are self-service so there are no attendants. We left baffled after our only attempt at this and subsequently made sure we always re-fuelled at pumps where an attendant would help you through the process. Payments could be made by credit card or cash. In total we spent around GBP100 on fuel, which cost slightly over GBP1 per litre at the time of our visit. Hugely irritating are the numerous speed and average speed cameras on all roads. Fortunately the SatNav (make sure you specify when booking and check on pickup that it'll talk to you in English) will warn you when they are coming up, what the speed or average speed limit is and when you have safely passed them.

The most difficult aspect about driving in South Korea is the expressway tolls. Unless your car hire agreement specifically states that you are covered for using "Hi Pass" toll gates, you should avoid doing so. That said, there is often very little or no warning as to which these gates will be. Generally they are the outside (lefthand) lanes and signed in blue although some of the other lanes may also have Hi Pass signs. We found the best strategy when approaching toll gates to enter an expressway was to head for the furthest righthand lane that had a lit up green arrow pointing downwards to indicate it was open. Such gates would sometimes allow you to pick up a ticket. When leaving an expressway, again our strategy was to look for an indicated open gate in a righthand lane that also had a booth next to it. Inside the booth, you handed over the ticket you had earlier picked up to an attendant who then took your cash payment. If you hadn't been given a ticket earlier (perhaps because the machine had run out of them?), then the attendant simply phoned up somewhere to find out where you had joined the expressway and how much you therefore owed. On a couple of occasions we did enter Hi Pass lanes in error (once because the signs wrongly indicated it was the only lane open). As you drive through this sets of various sirens and alarms. If this happens, pull over immediately and next to the toll gates there should be a building you can enter and pay the toll so all will be well with the world once more.

### **Internet**

Although all hotels had free Wifi as standard, we chose to rent a prepaid dongle from Trazy for GBP2.10 per day, booked via: <https://www.trazy.com/experience/detail/portable-wifi-rental-korea> This was picked up and dropped off at Terminal 1 in the airport and meant we both had internet access at all times: useful for navigation in particular and for using the Papago translation app.

### **Navigation**

Government legislation about the offshore holding of sensitive data concerning the border with North Korea means that Google Maps does not work for navigation in South Korea. While the car SatNav was very good for directing us to hotels, to set a destination it was essential to have a full postal address. Finding these for birding sites was often tiresome. Prior to the trip I had plotted all the important birding sites and eBird locations for key species (the latter downloaded as csv files and uploaded and automatically plotted) in Google Maps. This meant precise co-ordinates for each location were available via Google. Unlike Google, the navigation app Waze does work reasonably well in South Korea and has the advantage over the SatNav in that it would give directions to locations identified simply by inputting their co-ordinates. Before the trip we had added most of the locations in this way, giving them names so we could easily find them in the app. Consequently we largely used Waze for navigation, which generally was fine although it was unable to suggest a route when we were within the DMZ and it did let us down badly twice one day. On the first occasion it told us to carry straight on route 25 at a fork in the expressway whereas it should have told us to bear left on route

251. Later that day, although it had identified the hotel we had booked, it took us instead to the City Hall, some 15 km from where we wanted. Other than that, it would also occasionally tell you to make a U-turn when it meant simply turn left or on one occasion insist we turn left where no road existed. However, it is a free app, so I guess beggars can't be choosers!

An alternative to Waze, which is widely used in Korea, is Naver Map. Although I downloaded this app, it suffers from the same drawback as the SatNav in needing a precise postal address to navigate to. These could be found by pointing to a place on the map, although this was a rather tedious process compared to simply inputting the co-ordinates in Waze.

### **Language**

If, like us, you cannot speak or read Korean, we found the Papago app extremely useful. You can use it to type in what you want to say or take an image of something written in Korean and it will translate it for you—provided you are online at the time. The latter function in particular was invaluable.

### **Food**

We rather struggled as vegetarians. Many restaurants had photos outside of the dishes they served although even the translation using Papago often didn't throw much light onto what they were. Sometimes noodles would arrive cold—a huge disappointment in a cold climate! We did find a few Chinese restaurants where e.g. egg fried rice was available. Several times, I confess, we simply went to the nearest convenience store (7-Elevens are widespread) and bought pot noodles for dinner (all hotel rooms came equipped with a kettle). In convenience stores a decent sized bottle of beer (1.6 l) cost less than KRW7,000 whereas a 500 cc bottle in restaurants cost KRW5,000. Many restaurants shut early—often by 19:00. For breakfast and lunch we simply lived on snacks bought from 7-Eleven such as pastries and biscuits. We brought insulated mugs plus a supply of tea bags and milk sachets with us so we could make tea in our rooms and have hot drinks during the day.

### **Accommodation**

We pre-booked our first two nights as well as the hotel in Seoul and our last night near the airport. Apart from those, to keep things flexible, we simply used Booking.com to choose the next night's hotel depending where we wanted to go birding. Prices were in the range of £24 (Sokcho) to £66 (Best Western, Incheon Airport). Most birders follow a circular tour of the country, visiting the coastal wetlands and mudflats: we had planned to do the same but reworked our itinerary in view of the Pallas's Rosefinches at Gwangneung (National) Arboretum.

### **Climate**

We deliberately chose to visit South Korea in late winter when the daytime temperatures would be relatively mild while the day length would also be increasing. In Japan, we missed Baikal Teal which had departed the areas we visited by late February and I was concerned this might be the case in Korea, although I need not have worried. Most mornings were cold—generally around 0–3 °C, warming up to around 5 or 10 °C during the day and it was noticeably warmer in the south. The majority of days were calm and sunny. That said, at several sites we experienced a chilly wind and it was strong and hampered birding at both Hwaseong wetlands and on the east coast. In Sokcho, we awoke to a heavy snow shower. Although only 1–2 cm of snow fell there, further up the coast at Ayajin some 10 cm of snow had fallen. Rather than descend into total chaos, as would have happened in the UK, the snow ploughs were sent out and by 09:00 all the roads, even the minor ones, had been cleared. Others have experienced thick fog, particularly on the west coast, which obviously hampers birding opportunities.



### **The Scaly-sided Merganser conundrum**

I had previously put off visiting South Korea as I was labouring under the impression that one of the key target species—Scaly-sided Merganser—was not only shy and elusive but inhabited remote regions of the country that would necessitate the use of specialist assistance to visit. However, nothing could be further from the truth. In researching this trip I was astonished to find that a very reliable location for the species, Paldang Bridge, is not only within the outskirts of Seoul, it could easily be visited using public transport by anyone with a few hours to spare in the city. Nevertheless, the species is classified as "sensitive" on eBird and photographs posted there of it in South Korea are identified only to the province in which they were taken, while records of it are restricted access in checklists in which it was recorded. Apparently this is owing to the susceptibility of the species to disturbance, although this is clearly not the case for the birds at Paldang Bridge where there is constant heavy road traffic while along the banks run busy cycle and pedestrian walkways and when we visited there was active ongoing bridge construction. In spite of this baffling approach regarding the recording of sightings, through careful online research I was able to identify five sites where Scaly-sided Merganser had been sighted in South Korea—all of which we visited with two of them producing the goods. Should all these sites fail, Hottola's report gives extensive advice on rivers that could be searched for Scaly-sided Mergansers, based on his Google Maps analysis of suitable habitats. I am sure that knowledge of the whereabouts and ease of sightings of this species will encourage more birders—including those who would prefer specialist guidance—to visit the country.

### **Itinerary**

**February 15th.** Arrived Incheon Airport, Terminal 1 at 17:45. Took the shuttle bus from outside Exit Gate 14 to the Best Western Premier Hotel (stop 14C, buses every hour at ten minutes past the hour until 22.10 at the time of our visit).

**February 16th.** Shuttle bus back to Terminal 1. Picked up the dongle and hire car. Drove to Paju Sannam Wetlands. Quickly saw Swan Goose so tried for nearby Chinese Grey Shrike. Scored the shrike within minutes of arrival! An afternoon stroll from our hotel to the woodland opposite the cemetery (at ca. 37.791, 126.696) produced a White-backed Woodpecker. Night at Q Hotel.

**February 17th.** Yeoncheon Horogoru Ruins where a redhead Scaly-sided Merganser was the highlight. Gunnam Dam, no mergansers but our only Hill Pigeons and Little Buntings of the trip. Brief visit to DMZ for cranes then '97 Forest Trail with walkaway views of Hazel Hen. Night at Q Hotel.

**February 18th.** Tried an eBird-identified site for Pallas's Rosefinch. A quick return to Yeoncheon Horogoru Ruins hoping for a drake Scaly-sided Merganser but only the redhead present. Headed south to Hwaseong mudflats where six Relict Gulls plus two Saunders's Gulls present. Nearby Hwaseong wetlands produced a flyover Oriental Stork at dusk. Night at Hotel Charlot Castle.

**February 19th.** Heavy overnight rain and strong winds. Following an excellent (included) breakfast at the hotel returned to Hwaseong mudflats but the tide was out and only (very) distant gulls were seen. Despite strong winds an excellent day's birding at Hwaseong wetlands with nine Oriental Storks seen. Returned to Hwaseong mudflats but very quiet: a consequence of the strong onshore winds? Drove south to Sadong-ri. Night at A2 Hotel Designers.

**February 20th.** Seosan Lakes where three crane species seen. Birding was difficult owing to strong winds. Drove south to Gunsam checking the Geum River below the barrage. Night at Dashim Hotel.

**February 21st.** Early morning visit to Geum River then checked sites upstream from the barrage where a massive flock of Baikal Teals seen. Drove to Gomso Bay where good gulling on the south side. Night at Dasomchae Hanok Stay.

**February 22nd.** Naju-si, then a long drive north to Paldang Bridge where a pair of Scaly-sided Mergansers seen. Night at Namyangju Benikea JD Hotel.

**February 23rd.** Gwangneung (National) Arboretum for Pallas's Rosefinches and, appropriately, a single Solitary Snipe. Afternoon at Paldang Bridge where met Robert Cousins—a UK birder living in South Korea. He told us of the place to see Steller's Eagle nearby, but we arrived after it had left to roost. Night at Namyangju Benikea JD Hotel.

**February 24th.** Paldang Bridge. Scored Steller's Eagle and met very friendly Korean bird photographers. Headed east to Geojin headland where Harlequin Ducks seen but no sign of any Siberian Accentors. Overnight Sokcho Esher House Pension.

**February 25th.** Awoke to a heavy snow shower. After checking the hotel surroundings drove north to Ayajin Sea Port. Checked Yeongnang Lake then a long drive west to Incheon island. Night at Ocean Park 9.

**February 26th.** Dropped off hire car then took train into Seoul. Visited Inwangsan Mountain where eight Siberian Accentors seen. Afternoon sightseeing in Seoul. Night at K-Grand Hotel.

**February 27th.** Sightseeing in Seoul. Overnight Best Western Premier Hotel.

**February 28th.** Departed Incheon airport and arrived back in the UK the same afternoon.



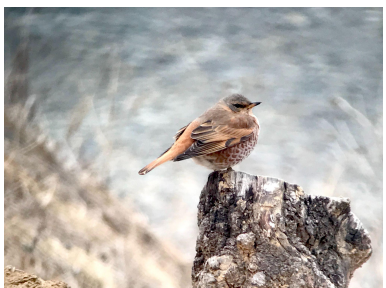
Gulls in Ayajin Sea Port



Swan Goose, Paju Sannam



Chinese Grey Shrike, Songchon-Dong



Naumann's Thrush, Yeoncheon Ruins

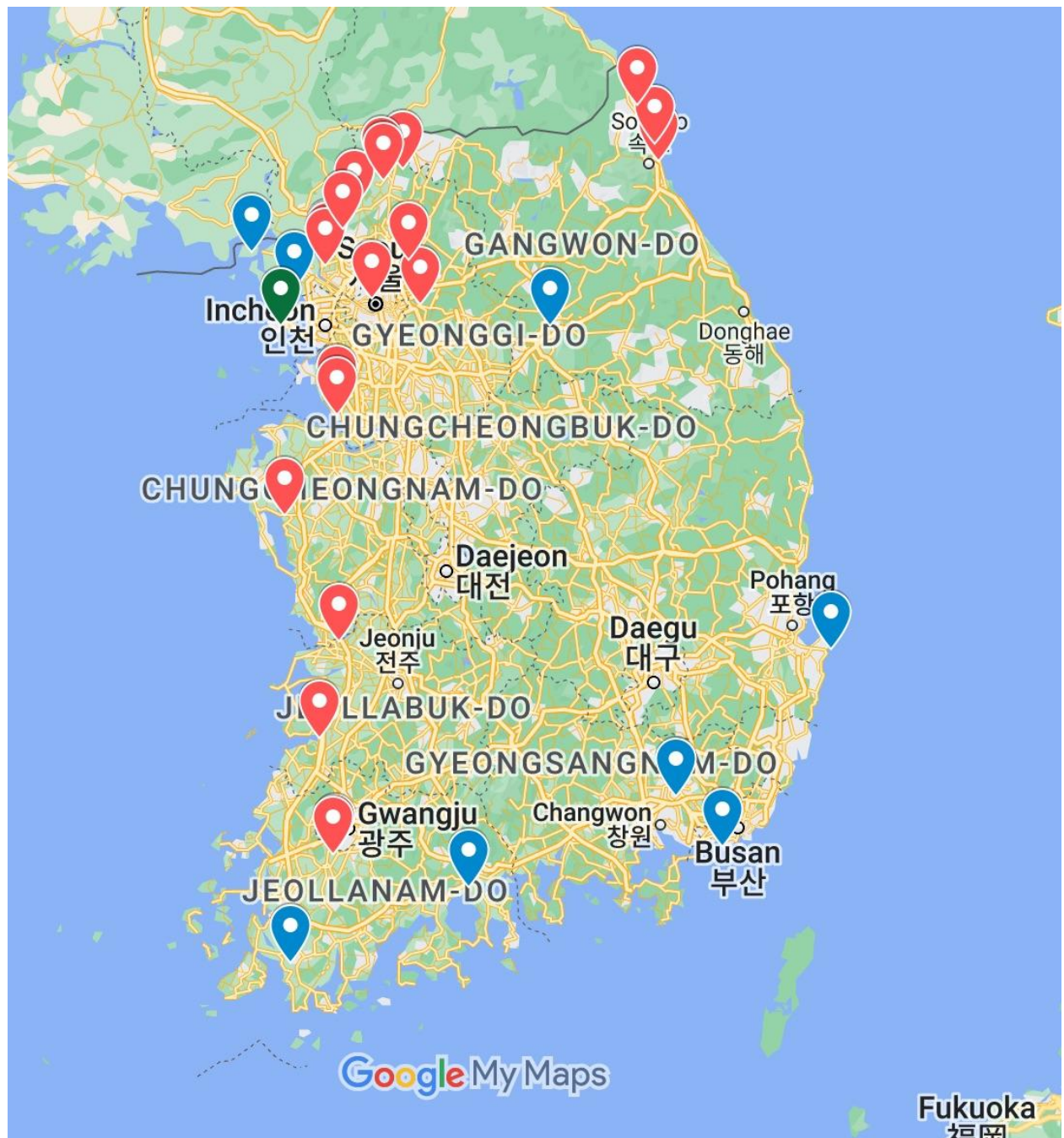


Relict Gull, Hwaseong mudflats



Saunders's Gull, Hwaseong mudflats

## Sites visited and/or mentioned in text



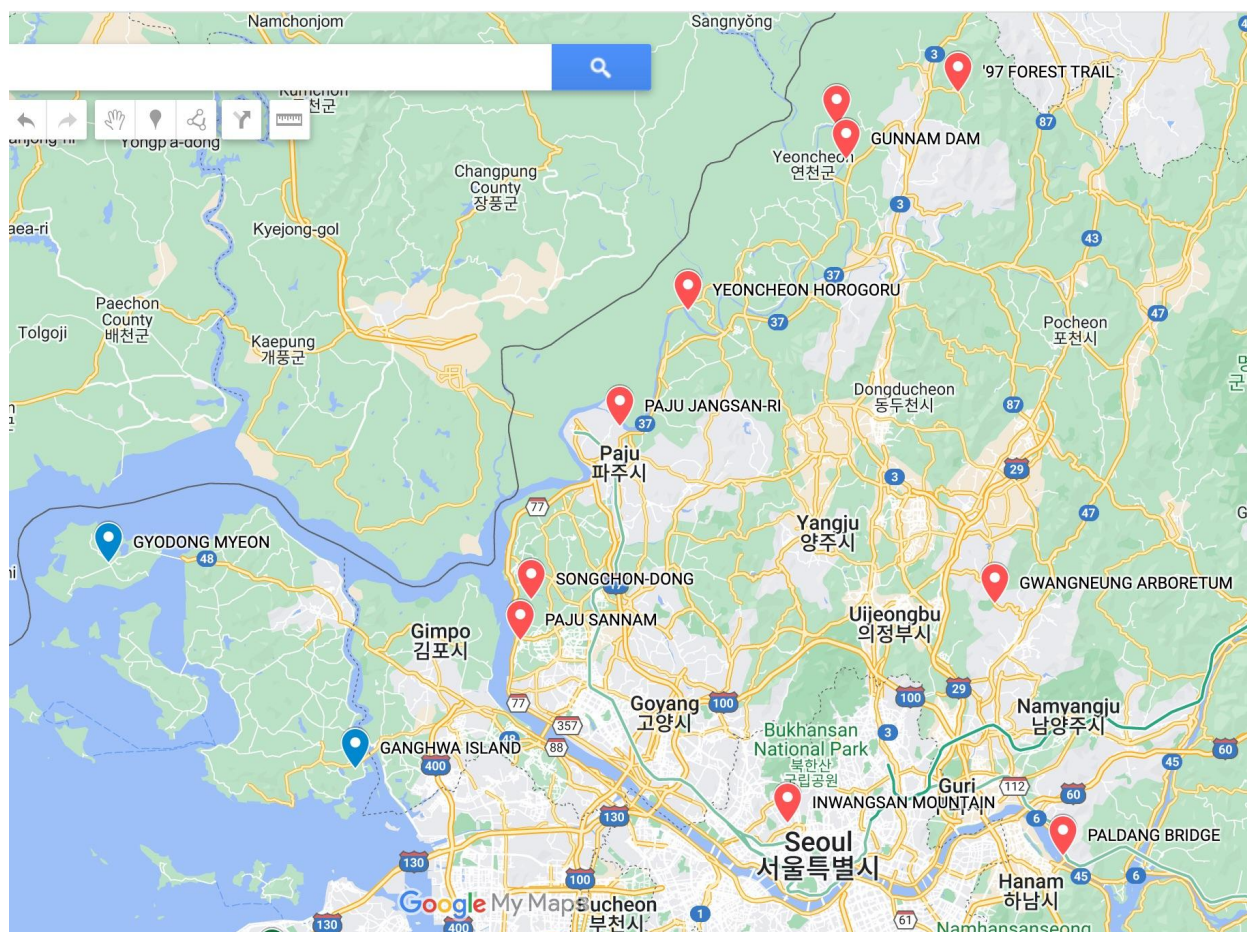
Relative location of sites mentioned in text. Orange: those we visited. Blue: other sites mentioned. Green: Incheon Airport.



Scaly-sided Mergansers, Paldang Bridge



## The northwest and Seoul



### **Paju Sannam Wetlands** (car park 37.717842, 126.691172). 02/16.

There are two large car parks on the east side of this small wetland. Viewing is from the road that runs along the east side. We saw 15 Swan Geese here although later during our visit up to 35 were reported. Other birds of note included Long-tailed Rosefinch, Black-faced Bunting, and Pallas's Reed Bunting.

### **Songchon-Dong** (37.755922, 126.701577). 02/16.

A site where Piper *et al.* saw a Chinese Grey Shrike in November 2022 that was still present in the area when we visited in February 2023. Apparently the species is regular there although occasionally birds are seen on the west side of the river channel, towards Yeonhwasa. We saw some distant Siberian Meadow Buntings so walked closer and as we were returning to the car, two small birds with pale rumps flew across the road and disappeared into cover. They proved to be Ochre-rumped Buntings.

### **Paju Jangsan-ri** (37.892909, 126.790317). 02/18.

We visited this location following up on a recent Pallas's Rosefinch sighting on eBird. Following the trail downhill from the parking spot and off to the left led to some excellent forest edge scrub full of buntings, but no rosefinches. Of note in this area were our only Hawfinches and Grey-capped Pygmy-woodpecker of the trip. Further up the road, at the top of the hill, a fine Dusky Thrush was seen.

**Yeoncheon Horogoru Ruins** (car park: 37.985844, 126.862929). 02/17, 02/18.

An historic site with ancient fortifications close to the DMZ that allows excellent views over the river below. The latter held large numbers of duck, mainly Mallards, while to the north were several Goosanders and in the rougher water on the bend a single redhead Scaly-sided Merganser. Up to three White-tailed Eagles were on the ice in the partly frozen river and when one flew it flushed all the ducks, including the merganser, which headed off along the bend to the west. We tried to follow it along the road that parallels the river to the north but soon reached a military checkpoint that we did not attempt to pass. The following day when we returned to the site the redhead Scaly-sided Merganser had teamed up with Goosanders in the river bend. Other birds of note here included a stunning male Naumann's Thrush and our first Bull-headed Shrikes of the trip.

**Gunnam Dam** (car park: 38.102999, 127.021080). 02/17.

Another location where Scaly-sided Merganser has been reported. From the car park walk down to the Red-crowned Crane theme park (complete with numerous crane statues) towards the river. The river upstream from the dam was frozen when we visited. We walked the downstream riverside track as far as the first roadbridge to the west below the dam but only saw Goosanders. Other birds of note included our only Little Buntings of the trip (by the road bridge), our first Cinereous Vultures of the trip and, on the dam itself, our only Hill Pigeons of the trip.

**Crane viewing point, DMZ** (layby: 38.1324984, 127.0090013) (Just north of Gunnam Dam on the map above). 02/17.

Again, another location where Scaly-sided Merganser has been reported. Shortly before you get to the layby and viewpoint there is a military checkpoint. The friendly soldiers there—one of whom spoke broken English—took our passports and in return gave us some entry passes to the DMZ. At the viewpoint itself are screens with photos of all seven crane species that have been recorded there. On the opposite side of the river we saw 100s of White-naped Cranes and with them three Red-crowned Cranes with two more in the river below. The only sawbills we saw were Goosanders. On our return, we swapped the passes for the return of our passports.

**'97 Forest Trail** (roadside parking: 38.159035, 127.130859). 02/17. Coming from the north, the trail leads off to the right shortly after you have driven over the hill and are descending steeply. The start is marked by a stone with '97 and some Korean characters carved into it. This is an excellent trail that allows access to good quality forest where Hazel Hens can be found. Park by the entrance and follow the wide trail that leads gently uphill before levelling out and then runs for several kms through the forest (we walked for about an hour before turning around). Siberian Accentor has been recorded at the start of the trail and Pallas's Rosefinch further along it, although we saw neither. We did see Long-tailed Rosefinches on four occasions and, shortly after a staircase of tyres leads off to the right, startled a party of Hazel Hens. Two males both ran off (one later returning), but a female flew up into a tree and started feeding there unconcerned by our presence for the next 20 minutes. It was still in the same tree when we returned that way some 20 minutes later.

**Gwangneung (National) Arboretum** (37.751945, 127.168306). 02/23.

The Arboretum is closed on Sundays and Mondays and opens at 09:00 on other days. Pre-booking is said to be needed, but we were allowed in by one of the ladies from the ticket office at 09:00. The entrance fee was KRW1,000 per person but paying for the parking fee (KRW3,000) was problematic as the payment booths would not accept foreign credit cards. Fortunately I was able to pay cash at the ticket office instead. It is a well-known stakeout for Solitary Snipe although we had not planned to visit for this, having seen this species in Japan and, in my case, Nepal too. However, a very recent record of Pallas's Rosefinch on eBird included a photograph that appeared to be taken at a feeding station. I emailed the observer, Justin Lee, who kindly replied to say that up to four Pallas's Rosefinches were indeed visiting a feeder. Once inside, I showed a photo of a Pallas's Rosefinch at the Information

Centre and we were soon led by a friendly warden to the bird feeder in question. There he told us Varied Tits were his friends and after a few whistles about half a dozen appeared and started feeding out of his hand on the nuts he had brought with him, one even taking a nut he held in his lips! The birds were exceedingly tame, one even landing on my phone as I Tweeted a photo of the Pallas's Rosefinch that arrived shortly afterwards and landed on the bird feeder. At least two rosefinches regularly appeared at the feeder over the next hour or so we stayed there. Afterwards, a walk around the gardens produced a Solitary Snipe along the river (just north of the first bridge) and a Grey-headed Woodpecker was heard.

**Paldang Bridge** (we parked off Paldang-ro on the north side of the river in a coffee house's car park without a problem: 37.541820, 127.253407. Parking for Steller's Eagle: 37.537115, 127.259666). 02/22, 02/23, 02/24.

This is a reliable stakeout for Scaly-sided Merganser and, in recent years at least, Steller's Eagle as the same bird has been wintering here since about 2017. From the parking off Paldang-ro we walked west along the north shore of the river on our first visit and soon found a pair of Scaly-sided Mergansers feeding around the gravel islands just to the west of the road bridge at 37.551067, 127.235794. Large numbers of wildfowl were present in the area, including 100s of Whooper Swans and Bean Geese. On our second visit we walked across the bridge to the south side of the river where we met Robert Cousins who put us onto a nearby Hoopoe. He also told us about the Steller's Eagle stakeout on the north side of the river—park in the small layby (where there is a photo of the eagle and probably several photographers waiting to get a snap of it). The following day when we visited we met several very friendly bird photographers who must spend hours at the site waiting to get the ultimate photo of a Steller's Eagle. One of them showed us photos of the Scaly-sided Mergansers that are regularly seen from the viewpoint there. He also told us he had seen Siberian Accentors there twice.

**Inwangsan Mountain, Seoul** (37.577601, 126.959949). 02/26.

We visited here following up on an eBird report of a Siberian Accentor a few days earlier. According to this website: <https://www.koreatodo.com/inwangsan-mountain> the walking trails are closed on a Monday, but I presume this relates to the trails further up the mountain rather than where we visited. Take the metro to Dongnimmun and leave the station from Exit 1. Walk north and follow the brown signs with tiny Roman lettering beneath the Korean name pointing towards Inwangsan Mountain. Once at the walking trails, we took the lower track that heads north skirting the buildings to your left. This passed through thick scrub and within 200 m we found a small party of Long-tailed Rosefinches and several Azure-winged Magpies followed shortly afterwards by a party of three Siberian Accentors. Further on we encountered five more accentors, shortly after the turning to Muakjae metro station from where we returned to Seoul. Several walking trails lead to the summit of Inwangsan where Alpine Accentors are apparently present.



Oriental Stork, Hwaseong wetlands



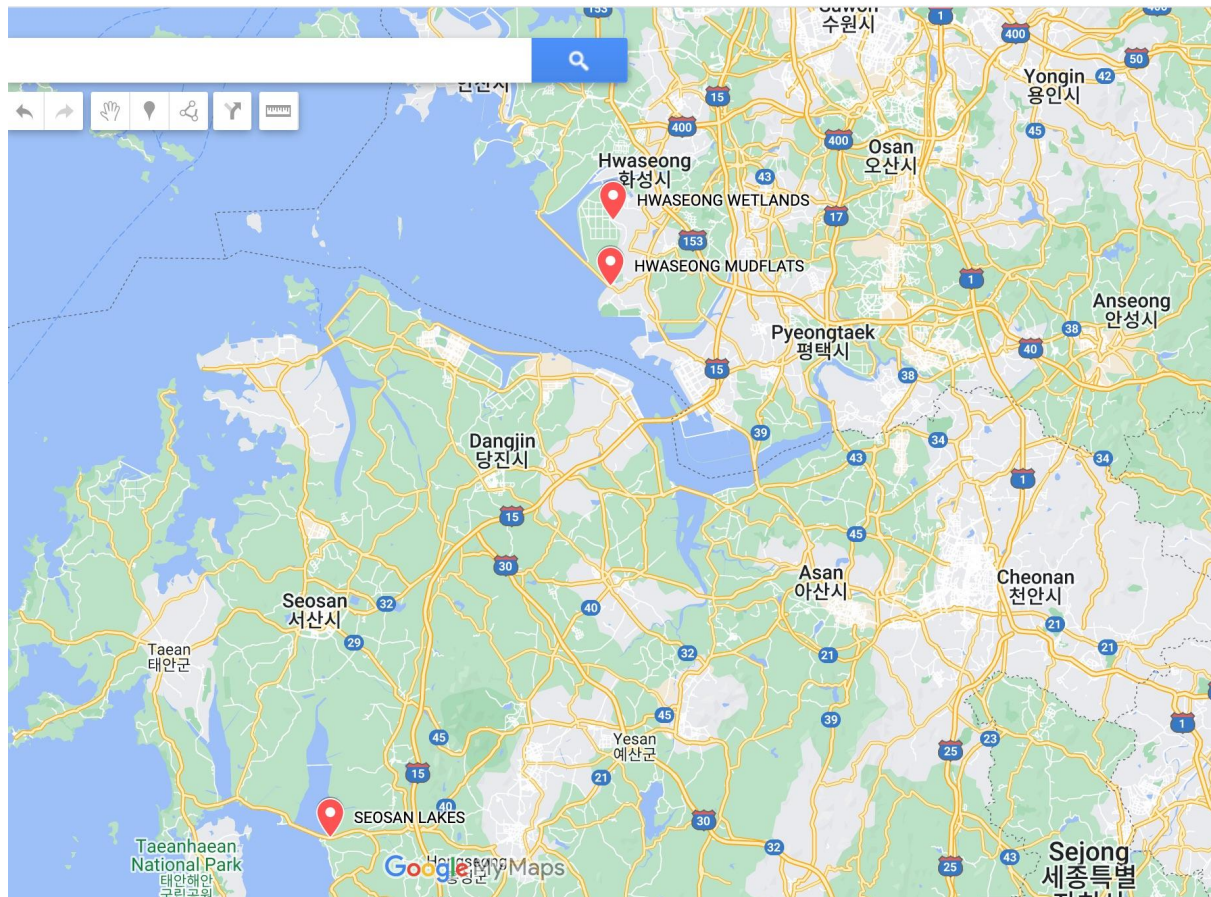
Chinese Penduline-tit, Hwaseong



Drake Harlequin Duck, Geojin headland



## The central region



**Hwaseong mudflats** (37.055391, 126.756828). 02/18, 02/19.

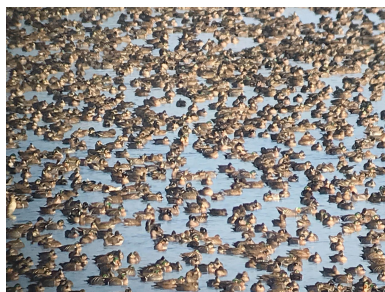
We visited this site following up on a 2023 eBird report of both Relict Gull and Saunders's Gull sightings. A rough, driveable track leads southwest along the side of the mudflats. We were lucky on our first visit in that the tide was well in and the mudflats held large numbers of Eurasian Curlews and Black-tailed Gulls. Among the latter were six Relict Gulls, all second calendar year (2CY) individuals. Overhead a couple of Saunders's Gulls were hawking the area and occasionally settling on the sea. A lady scoping the curlews turned out to be an environmental educator. One of her students, who spoke English, told us the lady had observed a Spoon-billed Sandpiper at this location in spring 2022. She was very impressed with Sarah's COVID mask that featured an image of that species on it! When we returned to the site the following morning the tide was well out, with mud to the horizon and zero birds aside from a few distant gulls. Later in the day we returned again at high tide, but this time there were strong onshore winds and to our surprise zero curlews or gulls present: presumably because of the wind, or perhaps we had simply been lucky the day before?

**Hwaseong wetlands** (park by locked gate at: 37.110406, 126.760349). 02/18, 02/19.

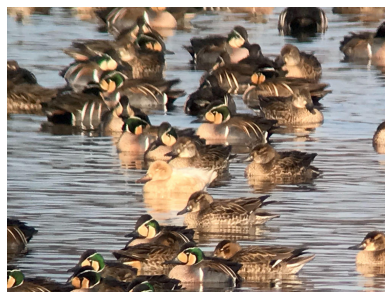
This was probably our favourite site of the trip, visited because we were following up on an eBird report of an Oriental Stork there a few weeks previously. Park in the small layby just before the locked gate. The gate can easily be skirted around on foot. Although we saw plenty of people and vehicles beyond it, we were never challenged as to what we were doing there so I am unsure why the road is gated. On our first afternoon visit we were delighted to see an Oriental Stork fly over heading north at dusk although the views were insufficient to determine if it was ringed (and therefore a captive-bred release) or not. We also saw a distant flying flock of around 40 spoonbills that appeared to have black faces. Although they alighted on a flooded field, unfortunately they had departed before we reached them so were unable to confirm their identity. The following day, 5 Eurasian Spoonbills were feeding

on the field. We spent several hours birding around the site on 19th February that began with an adult Daurian Jackdaw in the large corvid flock (mainly Rooks) by the locked gate. Shortly afterwards we found a Chinese Grey Shrike sitting on telegraph wires which was followed by another flyover Oriental Stork. This was quickly followed by a stork that landed and we were able to approach and confirm it bore a green ring with black lettering on its left leg above the tarsus and was therefore presumably from an earlier captive breeding and release programme. A vehicle driving in from the north flushed more storks and we later found eight feeding in a field (at ca. 37.121, 126.738). We were able to confirm that several of the birds were unringed—and therefore tickable. Elsewhere we encountered several buntings along the reedy dykes. Most of those we identified were Pallas's Reed Buntings, but we obtained good views of three Ochre-rumped Buntings and a couple of Reed Buntings. Along the dyke closest to the seawall was a small party of Chinese Penduline-tits. Also of note were several White-tailed Eagles and a male Merlin hunting in association with a male Hen Harrier. Quite a day's birding!

**Seosan Lakes** (turning for fields by the east lake at 36.594107, 126.464600). 02/20. Turn off the dual carriageway opposite a shop and cafe a few hundred metres from the east lake. Turn immediately right then take the first track on the left. This will take you up onto the concrete road that runs alongside the lake. Use the various tarmac and unsealed tracks to explore the fields to the east of here. This is one of the top birding sites in Korea. It is a reliable site for Oriental Stork, and although we didn't see any, small numbers were reported there before and after our visit. We quickly located a large flock of 100s of Hooded Cranes feeding in an area that was roped off to prevent disturbance to the birds. While scanning through them I picked out a Sandhill Crane that almost immediately took flight with a dozen Hooded Cranes and disappeared towards the coast. Later on, a large flock of cranes nearer the coastal road included an adult Common Crane. Other birds of note included a White-tailed Eagle and, in the scrub around (36.645, 126.487), some Black-faced Buntings. An apparent adult Glaucous-winged Gull patrolling the roadbridge (at 36.656, 126.454) on closer inspection had an odd underwing pattern that suggested it may be a hybrid? (see photo on page 16).



Baikal Teals, Geum River



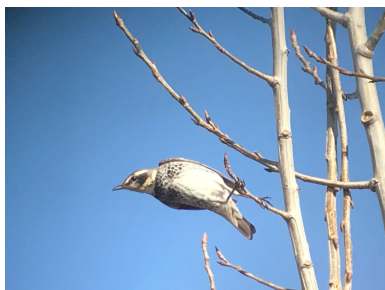
Albino Baikal Teal, Geum River



Baikal Teal, Geum River



Grey-headed Woodpecker, Naju-si



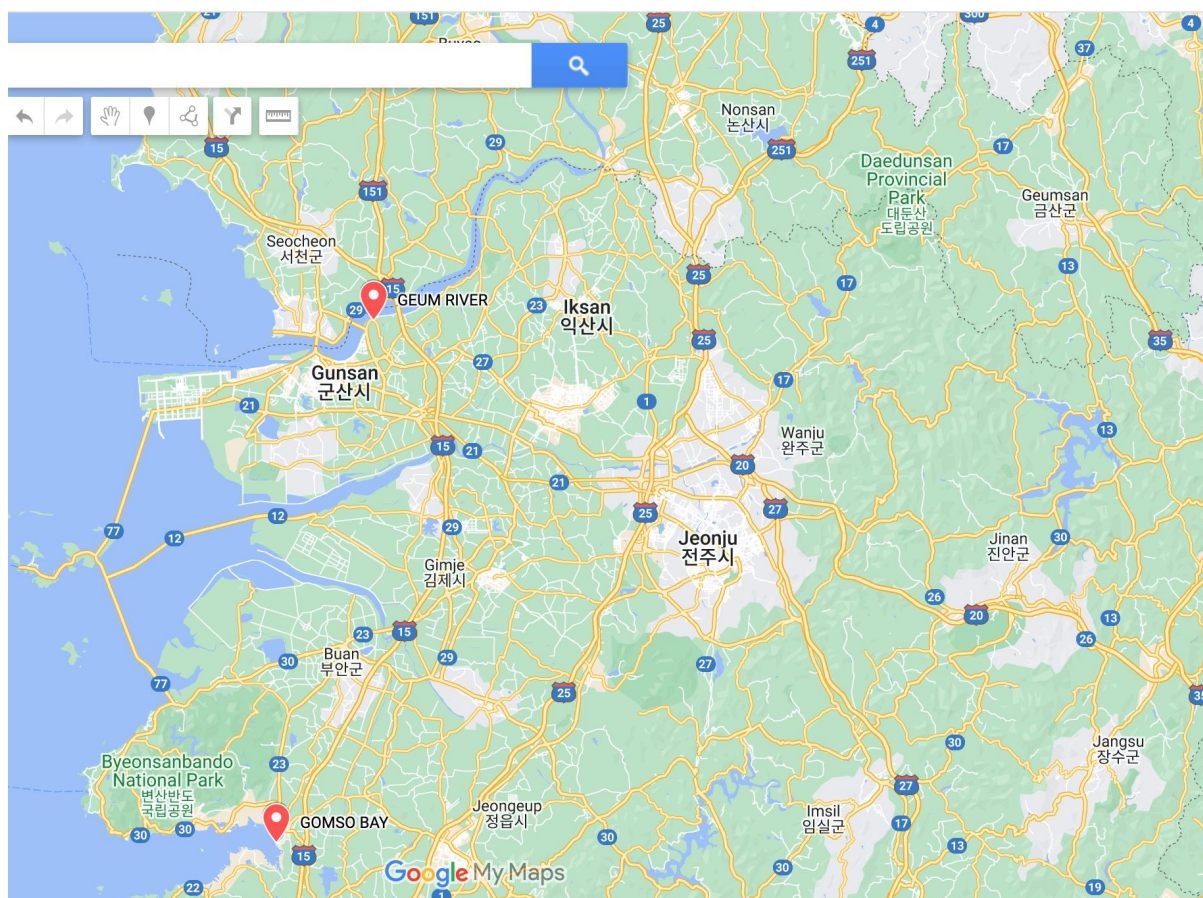
Dusky Thrush, Naju-si



Scaly-sided Merganser, Paldang Bridge



## Geum River and Gomso Bay



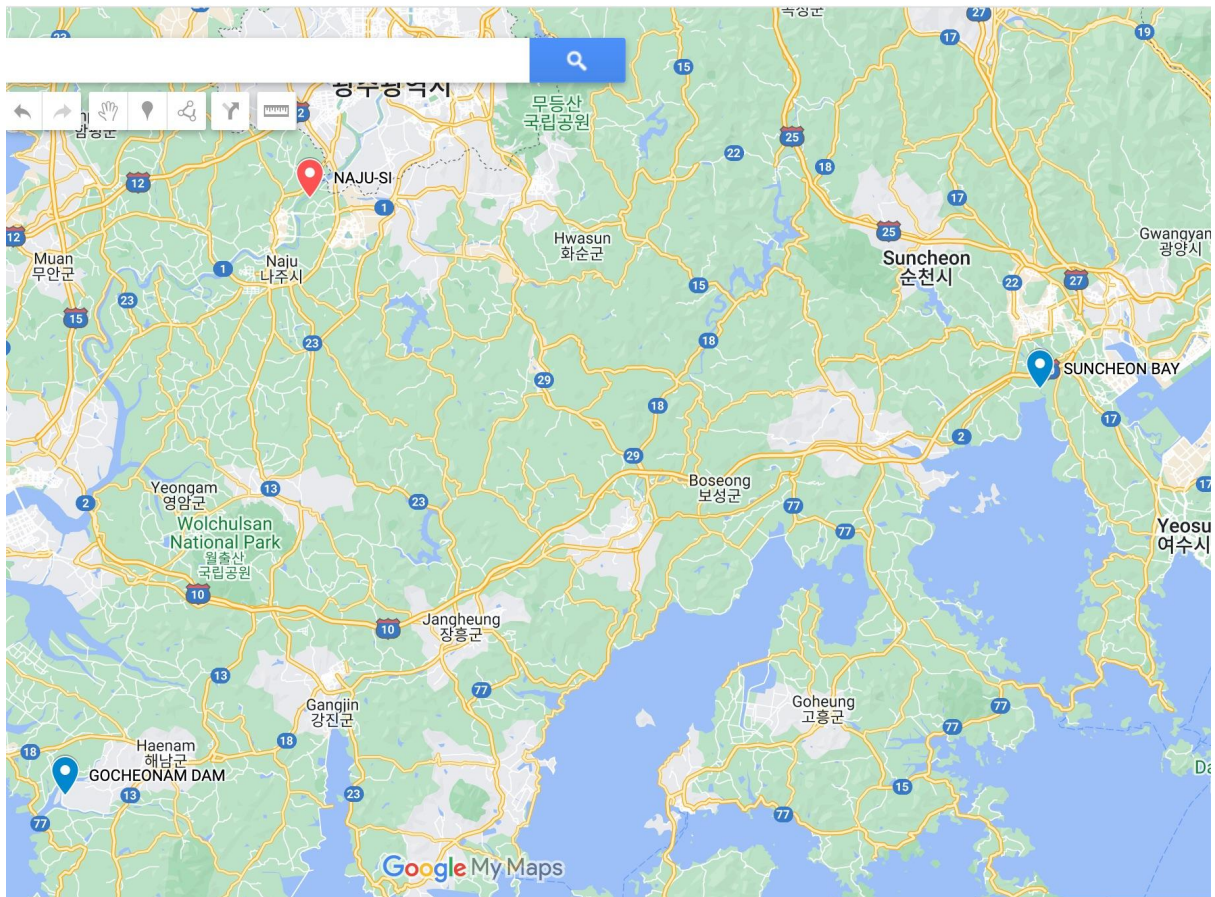
**Geum River** (view river south of barrage from Gangbyeon-ro highway. E.g. parking at 35.994364, 126.749404 and 35.986464, 126.738810. River viewing by the huge Baikal Teal statue at 36.020640, 126.763686. To view above the barrage (for Baikal Teals) park off Cheolsae-ro. E.g. 36.030821, 126.815179 (where the teal flock was when we visited)). 02/20, 02/21. We arrived at the Geum River when the tide was fully in and the wind was howling. This made birding extremely difficult to say the least! We concentrated on the area downstream from the barrage on our first afternoon and saw large flocks of Common Pochards and Northern Pintails. The following day dawned bright and still and a pre-breakfast visit produced a distant drake Falcated Duck. Later, we followed Cheolsae-ro eastwards alongside the south side of the river. At 36.030821, 126.815179 we parked and walked up onto the embankment to be met by the sight of tens of thousands of Baikal Teals. We were mesmerised watching the flock. Dozens of birds swam towards us and some flew onto the bank below us, only metres away. Other small parties would take flight and circle around to join the main flock as if getting ready for the long migration north. In amongst the flock we found an all white bird with apparently pink eyes and bill that can only have been an albino although the head and neck were coloured somewhat yellowish—presumably staining rather than pigmentation.

**Gomso Bay** (Ecological Park: 35.577986, 126.664694). 02/21.

The wetland area by the Ecological Park held very few birds. However, the seawall and drivable concrete track that leads off Saposangam-ro at 35.554866, 126.663896 on the south side of the bay held 10 Cinereous Vultures and 100s of gulls. We spent some time scrutinising them, getting confused but identifying Vega, Mongolian, Glaucous (two 2CY birds), Heuglin's, a 2CY Slaty-backed, several Common (Kamchatka), and Black-headed Gulls. The area has traditionally been good for Oriental Stork while Webb recorded Swan Goose here.



## The Southwest



**Naju-si** (view the river from the minor road north of 35.035944, 126.738412. Park at 35.051885, 126.755957 to access the bridge across the tributary river). 02/22.

A known (former?) stakeout for Scaly-sided Merganser. This is the site where Hottola scored for this species and we visited here in the hope of seeing a drake. In that we were unsuccessful but there was good birding in the area with Grey-headed Woodpecker, numerous Bull-headed Shrikes and up to 100 Falcated Ducks. We also saw our first Azure-winged Magpies and our only Long-billed Plovers of the trip. A Eurasian Otter swam across the river.



Solitary Snipe, Gwangneung Arboretum

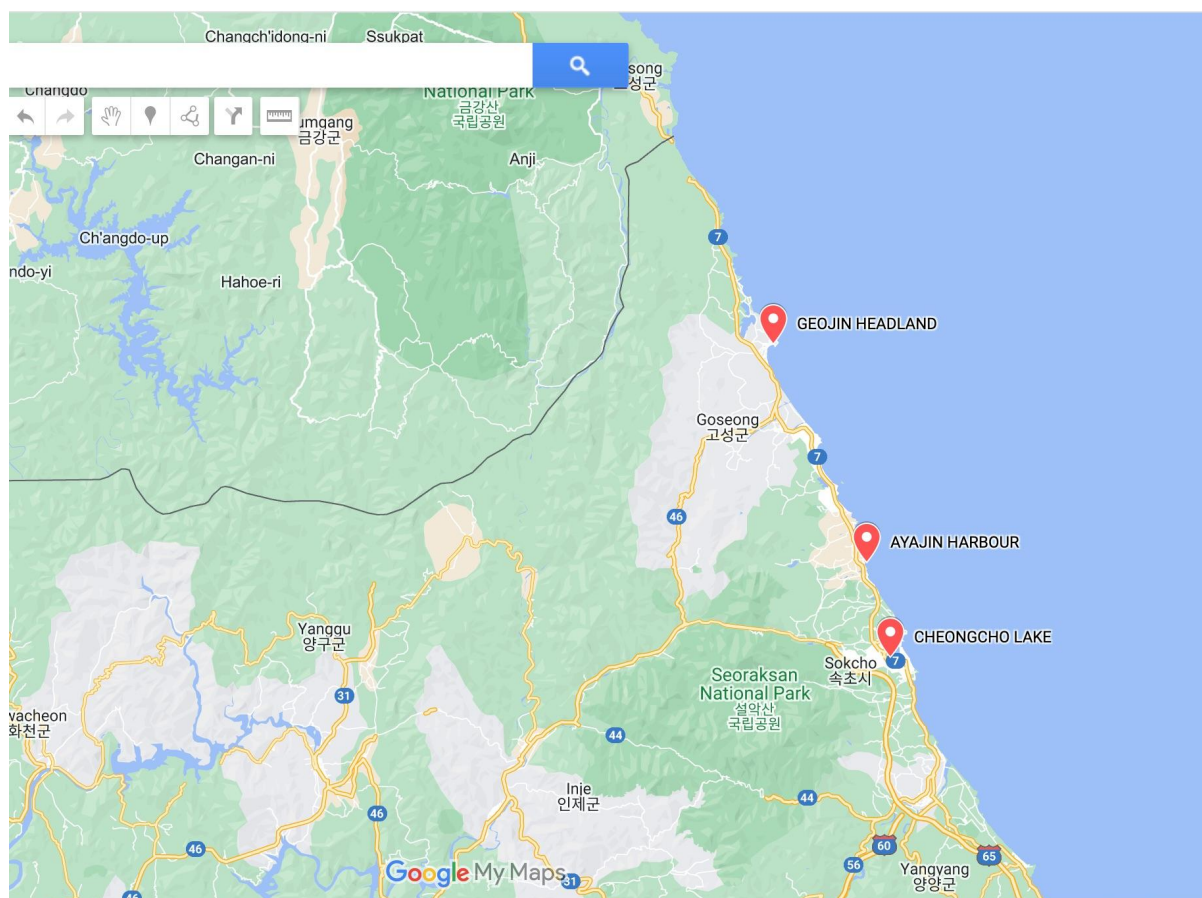


Pallas's Rosefinch, Arboretum



Steller's Eagle, Paldang Bridge

## The Northeast



**Geojin Headland** (Parking: 38.449119, 128.460002). 02/24.

We parked close to the harbour and walked first to the viewpoint at 38.450247, 128.468126 then up the headland. Despite the strong winds, we were able to locate around 15 Harlequin Ducks. Also out to sea were several Black-throated Divers (Pacific Diver is possible here too), several Black-necked Grebes and many Pelagic Cormorants. Inland, the woodland was extremely quiet, almost devoid of birds.

**Sokcho Beach** (38.189913, 128.604154). 02/25.

The scrub around our hotel failed to produce any interesting passerines, but out to sea we saw several Black-throated Divers, a single Black Scoter and a passing Police vessel flushed a large, but very distant party of auks that were probably Rhinoceros Auklets. A single Red-necked Grebe was also seen.

**Ayajin Harbour** (38.270315, 128.557345). 02/25.

A visit here was rewarded with at least 15 Slaty-backed Gulls, two adult Glaucous Gulls and out to sea several Black-necked Grebes, a few Horned Grebes and Black-throated Divers. In the harbour were several Japanese Cormorants and out to sea numerous Pelagic Cormorants.

**Cheongcho Lake, Sokcho** (38.192804, 128.582197). 02/25.

A quick visit here produced numerous Greater Scaups and Goosanders as the highlights—alongside many interesting dark Common Gulls.



## Sites not visited by us

I include the following for completeness sake: for details on all except Gyodong Myeon Island, please refer to the excellent trip reports mentioned earlier.

### **Ganghwa Island** (37.62111, 126.5239).

Hottola found large numbers of geese in the southeast corner of the island.

### **Gyodong Myeon Island** (37.785069, 126.275915).

Both Chinese Grey Shrike and Pallas's Rosefinch were reported on this relatively small island on eBird shortly before our visit to Korea.

### **Gocheonam Dam** (34.53686, 126.49285).

Another good wildfowl area in the southwest where Oriental Stork and Swan Goose are recorded.

### **Suncheon Bay** (34.88545, 127.51022).

A wetland site with small numbers of Baikal Teals and Chinese Grey Shrike possible.

### **Joonam Reservoirs** (35.310653, 128.679978).

Inland reservoirs with a reputation for wildfowl rarities. The area was apparently closed owing to bird flu concerns in late 2022.

### **Nakdong Delta (Busan)** (35.078405, 128.951111).

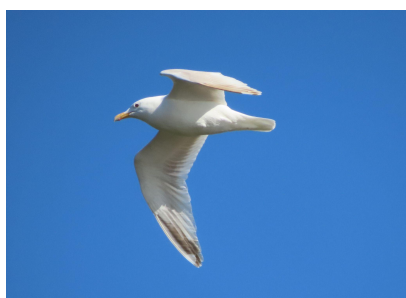
A rather developed coastal tidal area with several wintering Steller's Eagles and a good place for Relict Gulls.

### **Guryongpo Peninsula** (35.990117, 129.561171).

A peninsula with a good population of wintering Siberian Accentors, while out to sea are many divers, auks and gulls in winter.

### **Hoengseong River** (37.45698, 127.97375).

A potential area for Scaly-sided Mergansers. See Hottola's report for advice on where to look for this species in the area.



Hybrid? Glaucous-winged Gull type, Seosan  
Above photos by Sarah Thomas.

Giant Baikal Teal statue, Geum River

White-necked Crane, near DMZ

## Systematic list

Taxonomy follows the BirdLife International checklist.

**Ring-necked Pheasant:** Yeoncheon Horogoru Ruins, Hwaseong wetlands, Naju-si etc.

**Hazel Hen:** 3 seen well '97 Forest Trail.

**Whooper Swan:** common

**Greylag Goose:** only seen at Yeoncheon Horogoru Ruins

**Swan Goose:** 15 Paju Sannam Wetlands

**Bean Goose:** widespread and surprisingly numerous. Most were *serrirostris* "Tundra Bean" but *middendorffi* "Taiga Bean" also seen.

**Greater White-fronted Goose:** common.

**Black Scoter:** single Sokcho Beach.

**Common Goldeneye:** fairly common.

**Smew:** 6 Hwaseong wetlands, 4 Seosan Lakes, 4 Paldang Bridge.

**Goosander:** common.

**Scaly-sided Merganser:** redhead Yeoncheon Horogoru Ruins, pair Paldang Bridge.

**Red-breasted Merganser:** common in coastal areas.

**Harlequin Duck:** 15 Geojin headland

**Common Shelduck:** common Geum River below barrage.

**Common Pochard:** common Geum River below barrage, also Paldang Bridge and single Paju Sannam.

**Tufted Duck:** common.

**Greater Scaup:** ca. 30 Cheongcho Lake, Sokcho.

**Baikal Teal:** a huge flock (tens of 1000s) Geum River above barrage that included an albino individual.

**Falcated Duck:** drake Geum River, ca. 100 Naju-si.

**Gadwall:** fairly widespread in small numbers.

**Eurasian Wigeon:** 6 Naju-si.

**Chinese Spot-billed Duck:** common.

**Mallard:** very common.

**Northern Pintail:** fairly common Geum River, mostly below barrage.

**Common Teal:** widespread in small numbers.

**Little Grebe:** small numbers Hwaseong wetlands, Season wetlands, Paldang Bridge.

**Red-necked Grebe:** single Geojin headland.

**Great Crested Grebe:** common e.g. several 100 off Sokcho beach.

**Horned Grebe:** several Geojin headland.

**Black-necked Grebe:** ca. 300 Seosan Lakes, several Geojin headland.

**Rock Dove:** mainly in Seoul.

**Hill Pigeon:** 3+ Gunnam Dam.

**Oriental Turtle-dove:** common.

**Common Coot:** several Naju-si, Paldang Bridge.

**Sandhill Crane:** single with Hooded Crane flock Seosan Lakes.

**White-naped Crane:** 100s DMZ, up to 6 Hwaseong wetlands.

**Red-crowned Crane:** 5 DMZ.

**Common Crane:** single adult with Hooded Cranes Seosan Lakes.

**Hooded Crane:** large numbers Seosan Lakes, several Gomso Bay.

**Black-throated Diver:** small numbers off northeast coast.

**Oriental Stork:** 9 Hwaseong wetlands, at least one of which was ringed, although others were not.

**Eurasian Spoonbill:** 5 Hwaseong wetlands.

**Grey Heron:** common.

**Great White Egret:** common.

**Pelagic Cormorant:** common off northeast coast.

**Great Cormorant:** common.

**Japanese Cormorant:** small numbers identified off northeast coast, e.g. Ayajin Sea Port.

**Eurasian Oystercatcher:** 4 Hwaseong wetlands.

**Grey Plover:** 4 Seosan Lakes.

**Long-billed Plover:** 7 Naju-si.

**Eurasian Curlew:** large flock (several 100) Hwaseong mudflats.

**Dunlin:** 10 Seosan Lakes.

**Solitary Snipe:** single Gwangneung (National) Arboretum.

**Common Snipe:** 2 Naju-si.

**Common Sandpiper:** single Naju-si.

**Green Sandpiper:** singles Paju Sannam, Gomso Bay, Naju-si.

**Spotted Redshank:** heard only Hwaseong wetlands.

**Saunders's Gull:** 2 Hwaseong mudflats.

**Black-headed Gull:** fairly common at coastal sites.

**Relict Gull:** 6 Hwaseong mudflats, all 2CY birds.

**Black-tailed Gull:** common at coastal sites.

**Common Gull:** fairly common Geum River, Gomso wetlands, Cheongcho Lake, Sokcho. Most appeared to be *kamchatkensis*.

**Slaty-backed Gull:** single 2CY bird Gomso Bay, ca. 15 (mostly 3CY or older) Ayajin Harbour.

**Glaucous Gull:** 2 Gomso Bay, adult Geojin headland, 2 adults Ayajin Harbour.

**Glaucous-winged Gull:** adult or hybrid (with Western Gull?) Seosan Lakes.

**Heuglin's Gull:** several dark-mantled birds with bright yellow legs Gomso Bay. Two smaller such birds were considered to be *taimyrensis*.

**Vega Gull:** common at coastal sites.

**Mongolian Gull:** an adult Yeoncheon Horogoru Ruins, several Paldang Bridge. At Hwaseong wetlands, Gomso Bay and Ayajin Harbour, several "Caspian-type" 2CY gulls were identified as this species.

**Cinereous Vulture:** 8 Gunnam Dam, single Seosan Lakes, 10 Gomso Bay, 6 on the drive north from Naju-si.

**Hen Harrier:** ringtails widespread at wetlands. Single grey male Hwaseong wetlands.

**Eurasian Sparrowhawk:** widespread in small numbers.

**White-tailed Sea-eagle:** up to 6 Hwaseong wetlands, 3 Seosan Lakes.

**Steller's Eagle:** single adult Paldang Bridge.

**Eastern Buzzard:** widespread in small numbers.

**Common Hoopoe:** single Paldang Bridge.

**Common Kingfisher:** single Gomso Bay.

**Grey-headed Woodpecker:** single Naju-si. Heard Gwangneung (National) Arboretum.

**Japanese Pygmy-woodpecker:** widespread in woodlands.

**Grey-capped Pygmy-woodpecker:** single Paju Jangsan-ri.

**White-backed Woodpecker:** single near Q Hotel, Paju.

**Great Spotted Woodpecker:** seen at four forest sites.

**Common Kestrel:** small numbers, including in Seoul itself.

**Merlin:** single male Hwaseong wetlands hunting in association with a male Hen Harrier.

**Peregrine Falcon:** single Gomso Bay.

**Bull-headed Shrike:** small numbers widespread but only numerous at Naju-si.

**Chinese Grey Shrike:** singles Songchon-Dong and Hwaseong wetlands.

**Azure-winged Magpie:** large flock (ca. 50) Naju-si, 5 Inwangsan Mountain.

**Eurasian Jay:** only seen in Seoul.

**Daurian Jackdaw:** a superb adult with large Rook flock Hwaseong wetlands.

**Rook:** several large flocks seen in the west.

**Carion Crow:** at least 2 Gomso Bay.

**Large-billed Crow:** common.

**Coal Tit:** Paju Jangsan-ri and Gwangneung (National) Arboretum.

**Varied Tit:** widespread but nowhere numerous except Gwangneung (National) Arboretum.

**Marsh Tit:** common.

**Great Tit:** common.

**Chinese Penduline-tit:** 6 Hwaseong wetlands.

**Eurasian Skylark:** single Songchon-Dong, a few Hwaseong wetlands.

**Brown-eared Bulbul:** common.

**Long-tailed Tit:** common.

**Vinous-throated Parrotbill:** common.

**Eurasian Nuthatch:** '97 Forest Trail, heard Gwangneung (National) Arboretum.

**Naumann's Thrush:** widespread in small numbers, including a superb male Yeoncheon Horogoru Ruins. Several intermediate birds among a small flock of about 20 birds at Naju-si were presumably hybrids with Ducky Thrush.

**Dusky Thrush:** singles Gunnam Dam, Paju Jangsan-ri.

**Daurian Redstart:** small numbers Hwaseong wetlands, Geum River, Gomso Bay.

**Siberian Accentor:** parties of 3 and 5 Inwangsan Mountain.

**Eurasian Tree Sparrow:** common.

**Water Pipit:** 2–3 *japonicus* birds Paju Sannam.

**Olive-backed Pipit:** 4 Geum River.

**Japanese Wagtail:** several Paldang Bridge.

**White Wagtail:** a few Hwaseong wetlands, fairly common Naju-si.

**Brambling:** widespread in forest areas in small numbers. Largest party ca. 40 birds in Seoul.

**Hawfinch:** ca. 10 Paju Jangsan-ri.

**Pallas's Rosefinch:** 2+ Gwangneung (National) Arboretum.

**Long-tailed Rosefinch:** single Paju Sannam, 4+ '97 Forest Trail, 4 Inwangsan Mountain.

**Oriental Greenfinch:** fairly common. Largest party ca. 50 Geum River.

**Siberian Meadow Bunting:** 3 Songchon-Dong, 5 Paldang Bridge.

**Yellow-throated Bunting:** common.

**Ochre-rumped Bunting:** 2 Songchon-Dong, 3 Hwaseong wetlands.

**Reed Bunting:** 2+ Hwaseong wetlands.

**Pallas's Reed Bunting:** single Paju Sannam, ca. 15 Hwaseong wetlands.

**Rustic Bunting:** fairly common and widespread.

**Little Bunting:** 4 Gunnam Dam.

**Black-faced Bunting:** single Paju Sannam, 2 Seosan wetlands, single Naju-si.



Siberian Accentor, Inwangsan Mountain. Photo by Sarah Thomas





View from Yeoncheon Horogoru Ruins



Varied Tit, Gwangneung Arboretum



Azure-winged Magpies, Naju-si



Hazel Hen, '97 Forest Trail



Hooded Cranes, Seosan Lakes. All photos this page by Sarah Thomas.