



SOUTH KOREA, IN DECEMBER 2014

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Fig. 1. White-naped Cranes at Joonam Reservoir, SE South Korea.

In December 2014, 16th to 25th, an eight-day solo visit to South Korea was completed, in an attempt to see 18 target species not yet on my world list. All of them, except **Oriental Stork**, could be located, with a **Grey-backed Thrush** as an unexpected bonus. From a viewpoint of a world lister, it may make sense to visit South Korea in winter, because of a locally concentrated assortment of rare wintering species, which are otherwise scattered around a vast region across China and Eastern Siberia. Also, the Korean winter is a mild one if compared to the conditions in Northern Europe, for example. Yes, the day temperature may be -17 C on the northern mountains, as it was on the 22nd, but it is not going to be -30 C, or lower! In the south of the peninsula, milder conditions prevail, also in winter. There may be up to 15 cm of snow on ground in parts of the region, but other areas of the Korean peninsula have no or only a smattering of snow.

South Korea is, however, also a particularly difficult destination to visit, in terms of detailed birdwatching information. Part of the material is only available in Korean and difficult to search because of the unique lettering. The English language information, on the other hand, is not always collectively shared, but kept secret by gatekeepers who prefer to guide people to the birds, for a fee, and also expect secrecy from their customers. Birds Korea home page (www.birdskorea.org), currently the best source of local gen, does provide general information on birdwatching locations but is not really helpful in pinpointing the most interesting species. All in all, it is a bit unusual arrangement, ultimately not really beneficial for birdwatching tourism or conservation in South Korea. Most of international bird tourism is, after all, based on individual travelers, who tend to dislike being guided. People who prefer guides, on the other hand, often join package bird tourism groups. In Korea, there would be space for both segments, if independent visits were supported more than they today are.

Overall, I would like to encourage solo visitors and independent groups to visit South Korea in winter. Information shortages may be overcome, with the help of detailed trip reports, as an example. South Korea is not a difficult location to travel around and if the knowledge increased, the more rewarding the visits were bound to be. Personally, I think I did rather well, even though I would certainly have done better if a sizable share of my limited time had not been spent in hit and miss search for an access to locations. Eight days is not quite enough to 'do' South Korea in winter, and I would recommend 12 days for a proper tour, with more time for photography, for example. On the other hand, I did the tour bird race style, starting before sunrise and driving some of the major distances after dark. In December, there was ten hours of sunlight in Korea, between 07.30 AM and 17.30 PM. Nevertheless, please keep in mind both the speed and the specific weather conditions of this trip, made by a person who visited South Korea for the very first time. The notes in this report should be judged accordingly; hopefully useful but not the unfailing truth.

As a bird identification reference, I would recommend Mark Brazil's excellent *Birds of East Asia* (Helm Field Guides). It covers the whole region and has information on subspecies, too, and answers to most identification problems in the field. Some of the distributional knowledge may be slightly erroneous, but that is only natural in a nation where the number of serious birders is small and much remains to be discovered, especially in regard to seasonality. In addition, Xeno Canto provides useful recordings for the key target species.

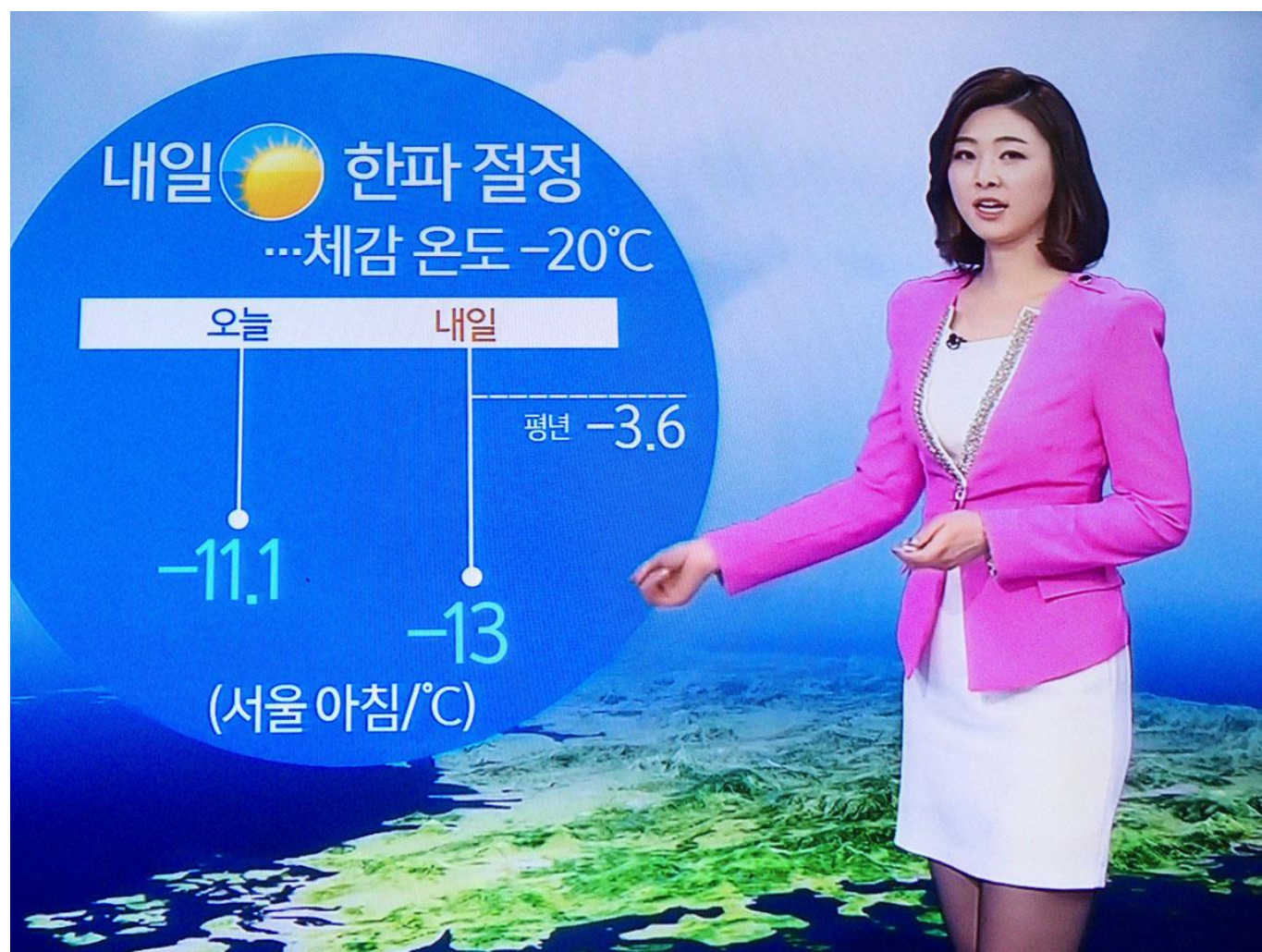
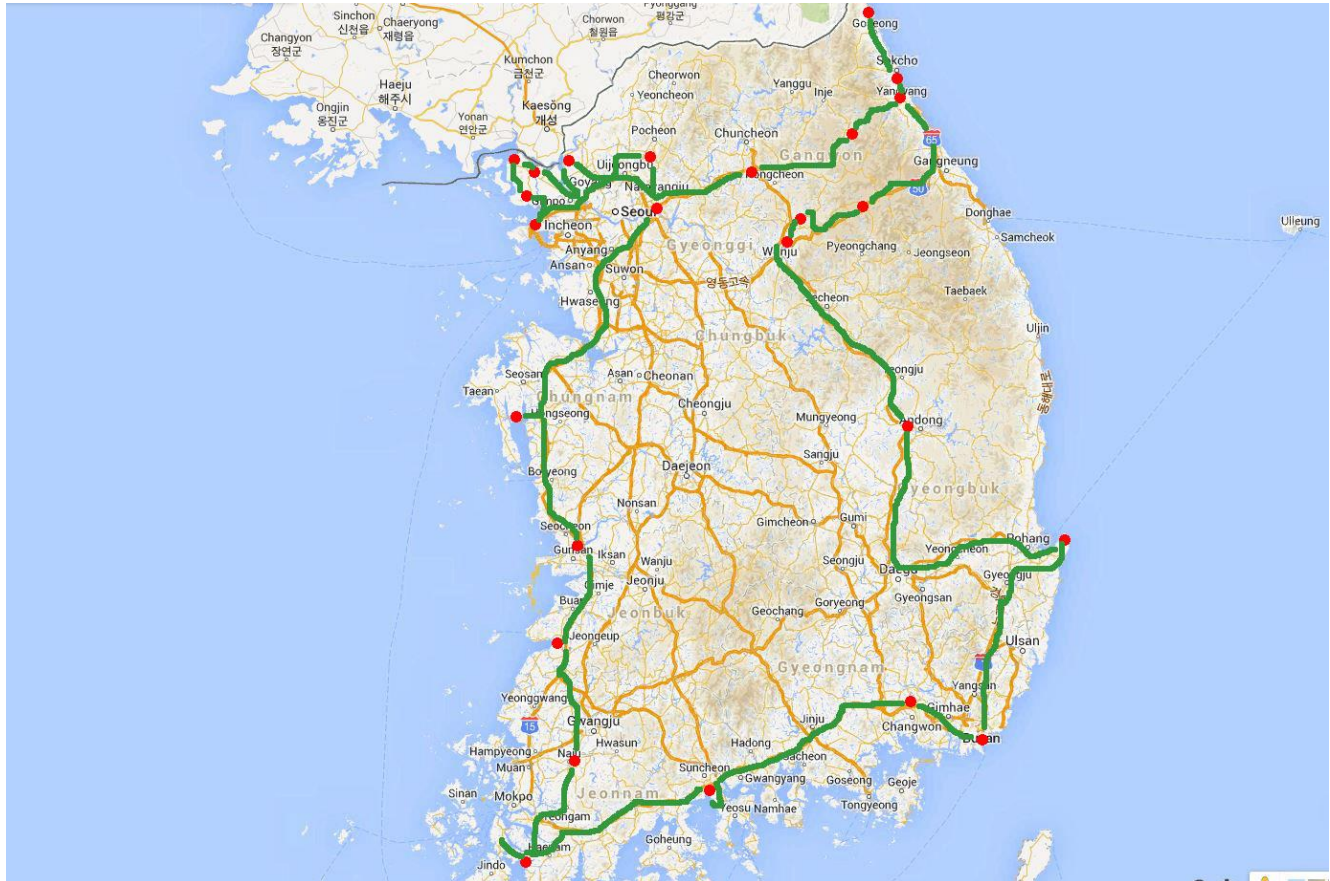


Fig. 2. Cold and sunny weather to be expected: weather forecast on my first birding day evening at Motel U. A cold front and a blizzard from the west had covered the southwest coast by snow, pushed a few birds off their usual route and stopped others before they could cross the sea to the warmth of South China.

ROUTE & TIMETABLE

My circular route around South Korea was based on a rather conventional list of sites. It was not possible to estimate the driving distances at Google Maps, because such an option was not available for South Korea (strange). Nevertheless, it is a small country and the highways are fast. Even around Seoul, traffic tended to flow well, without major delays. To guarantee maximum flexibility, I paid everything except the car rental in cash. I had exchanged over 1.000 000 won in Finland, for a good rate (no exchange fee), and spent 75% of it in Korea.



Map 1. The approximate route of my eight+ day tour around South Korea. Red dots indicate birding sites.

Timetable:

- 16th Dec:** Flight Fukuoka, Japan – Incheon (Parkwood Hotel), arriving at 21.45.
- 17th Dec:** Incheon – Gwangneum (National Arboretum) – Paldang – Seosan Lakes (U-Motel). Airport – arboretum took only 1 h 30 min, despite an initial learning process in regard to car, navigator, traffic and toll gates.
- 18th Dec:** Seosan Lakes – Geum River (Gunsan Riverhill Tourist Hotel). Driving time was 1 h 15 min.
- 19th Dec:** Geum River – Gomso Bay – Naju-si – Gocheonam Reservoir (Motel Beautiful). Geum – Julpo 45 min, Julpo – Naju-si 1 h 15 min, Naju-si – Gocheonam 45+ min.
- 20th Dec:** Gocheonam Reservoir – Suncheon Bay – Hanam (Motel Propose).
- 21st Dec:** Joonam (Yunam) Reservoir – Nakdong Delta (Busan) – Guryongpo Peninsula (Pohang) – Andong (Rich Motel). Joonam – Busan 45 min, Busan – Guryongpo 2 h 45 min, Guryongpo – Andong 3 h 45 min.
- 22nd Dec:** Andong – Wonju – Hoengseong – Yangyang – Daebo – Sokcho (Orange Motel). Hoengseong–coast 1 h.
- 23rd Dec:** Sokcho – Geojin-ri – Daepo – Yangyang – Hongcheon – Paju-si (Bandi Hotel).
- 24th Dec:** Paju-si – Galhyeon-ri – Han-Imjin – Gangwha Island (Motel K2).
- 25th Dec:** Gangwha Island – Incheon – Fukuoka, Japan, departure early afternoon. Gangwha – Incheon 45 min.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Part of the fun of traveling in South Korea is locating the daily accommodation, as a rule a 'love motel' somewhere close to a birding destination. As there appears to be about 15 times more love motels than hotels in the country, and their room rates are very competitive, the motels are the natural choice for a traveling birder. Personally, I searched Google Maps for them prior to the visit, only to later find out that many had changed their names or closed, and that there were many others not yet in the Internet databases. As a result, I put my Google Maps information aside and adopted a more practical approach. I ended my day somewhere convenient and let my navigator point out the available choices, picking the best one according to its appearance.

As Falk Wicker advised in his trip report (www.birdskorea.org/Birds/Trip_Reports/BK-TR-Zoo-Lu-Leipzig-2010.shtml), the old motels with a hot water-bowl sign are perhaps best avoided, if possible. I stayed two nights in these places, for the sake of convenience. They were not bad, not at all, but as non-smoking rooms do not yet exist in South Korea, the older rooms were smelly. Well, either because of the cigarette stink or because of some other odors accumulated during the past decades, or a combination of them. The new motels, oftentimes immaculate, could be astonishingly good deals, such as the Rich Motel at the Andong Intersection. In addition to the regular perks (high definition flat screen, computer for Internet surfing, machine for hot drinks, a water boiler and teabags, wide selection of cosmetics, up to four bottles of complimentary drinks in a fridge etc.) they could have a whirlpool bath and a private garage with an electric door operator. Whatever the age and quality of the establishment, I was always warmly welcome to stay at the motels.

Here is a list of the motels and hotels I stayed in South Korea:

Parkwood Hotel, Incheon. A double with a breakfast was won 65.000 (€52). The breakfast was good and staff friendly. The small hotel probably is not, however, the best deal close to the airport, even though I had no real complaints. The room was smaller and significantly more expensive than the rooms of the motels later on. The last airport shuttle to the hotel was at 10 PM, and I missed it by 10 minutes. My taxi to the hotel was won 10.000 (€7.50), according to the reception less than the usual inflated tourist rate of 15.000. In the morning, I had a free hotel shuttle to the airport, to collect the rental car.

Motel U, Galwondo-ri, Seosan Lakes. A Korean style double with floor heating (almost too hot!) was won 30.000 (€22). There were also rooms with a bed. Despite its uninviting outer appearance at night, Motel U was a great deal with a particularly friendly proprietor, right by the birdy Lake B (East) at Seosan Lakes, with secluded parking.

Gunsan Riverhill Tourist Hotel, Gunsan. A three person suite was won 80.000 (€60), with a whirlpool bath. Classy and peaceful (low season), but a bit too expensive for a solo traveler, and with a steep (icy) access road with limited parking next to the buildings. Great deal for a group of two or three. The motels in the area appeared old.

Motel Beautiful, Geumpyeong (S of Mokpo). A double was won 40.000 (€30). It was a fair choice, an old motel with a great location and a 7-Eleven next door, but the rooms were smelly and parking space limited.

Motel Propose, Hanam. A double cost won 30.000 (€22). A reasonable choice but, for my taste, a bit too popular as a love motel. The cries of the women in the neighboring rooms disturbed sleep in the evening. In addition, the room was a bit cold, the temperature probably being adjusted for less passive activities than sleeping.

Rich Motel, Andong Intersection. A double was won 45.000 (€34). Excellent choice with a great, peaceful location and amenities such as a large whirlpool bath. My best accommodation in South Korea.

Orange Motel, Sokcho. A double was won 40.000 (€30). A good deal on a peaceful side street, next to the coastal highway. The room could have been a bit more spacious, but everything I needed, and more, was there.

Bandi Hotel, Paju-si. A double cost won 40.000 (€30). The 'hotel' was more like a regular old school motel with somewhat smelly rooms but the location was good and the room all the necessary amenities.

Motel K2, Choji-ri, SE Gangwha Island. A double was won 35.000 (€26). Great deal with tidy and fresh rooms, from which geese and **Ruddy Shelducks** could be observed, feeding on a field at a distance of two hundred meters. Secluded parking and friendly service. For the price, it is not necessarily easy to find decent accommodation at Gangwha, according to Internet testimonials.



Fig. 3. The almost eerie building of Motel U, at Ganwoldo, Seosan Lake B. Indoors, it was light, warm and cosy.

As the room rates indicate, accommodation costs are low in South Korea, even for a solo traveler. Food and drinks were cheap, too, at least in shops and supermarkets. I never had time for a hot meal there, being too busy with driving and birding. Hot drinks, yes, but cold food, some of which was imported from Finland and Japan to avoid burning daylight in search for supermarkets in the beginning of the journey.



Fig. 4. The customary welcome drinks, two cans of cider, and a special gift for a Finnish birder, the first foreign customer ever, two packets of dried seaweed, a Korean delicacy. Now I have to find out how to prepare weed...

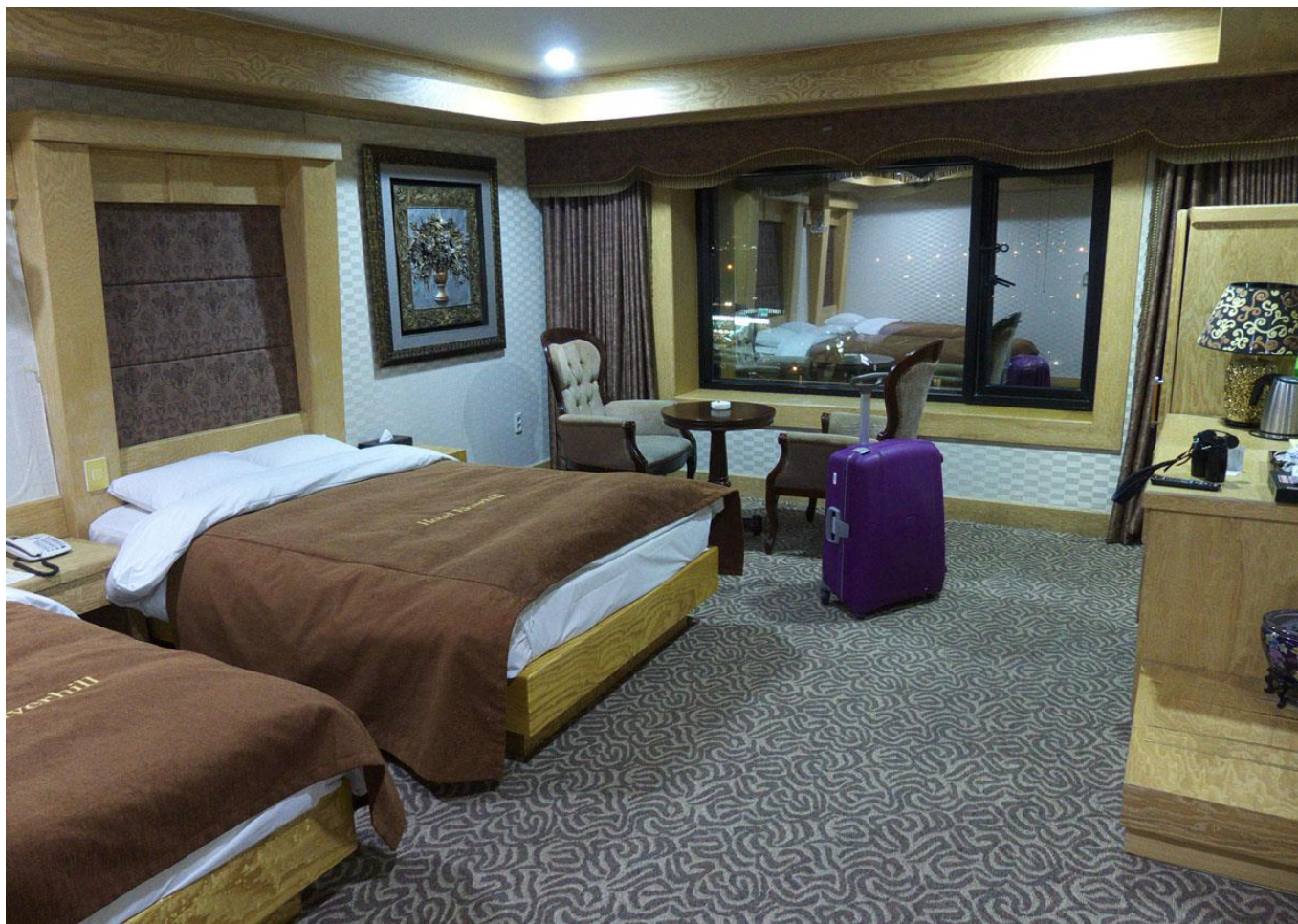


Fig. 5. Part of a triple room at Gunsan Riverhill Tourist Hotel, not a bad deal for €60.



Fig. 6. This Motel Propose bed was not designed for sleeping! Imagine the red ceiling lamps for the night...

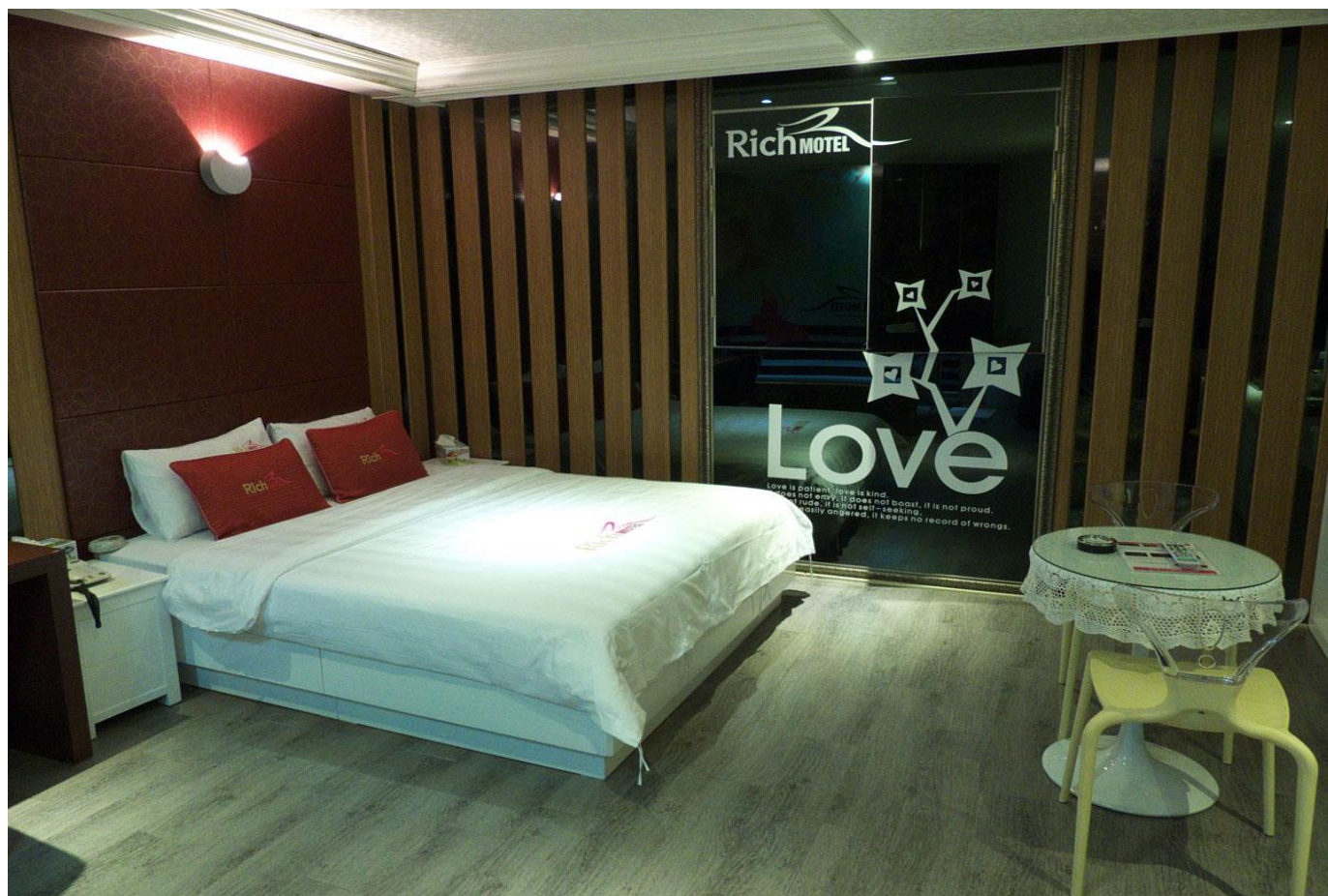


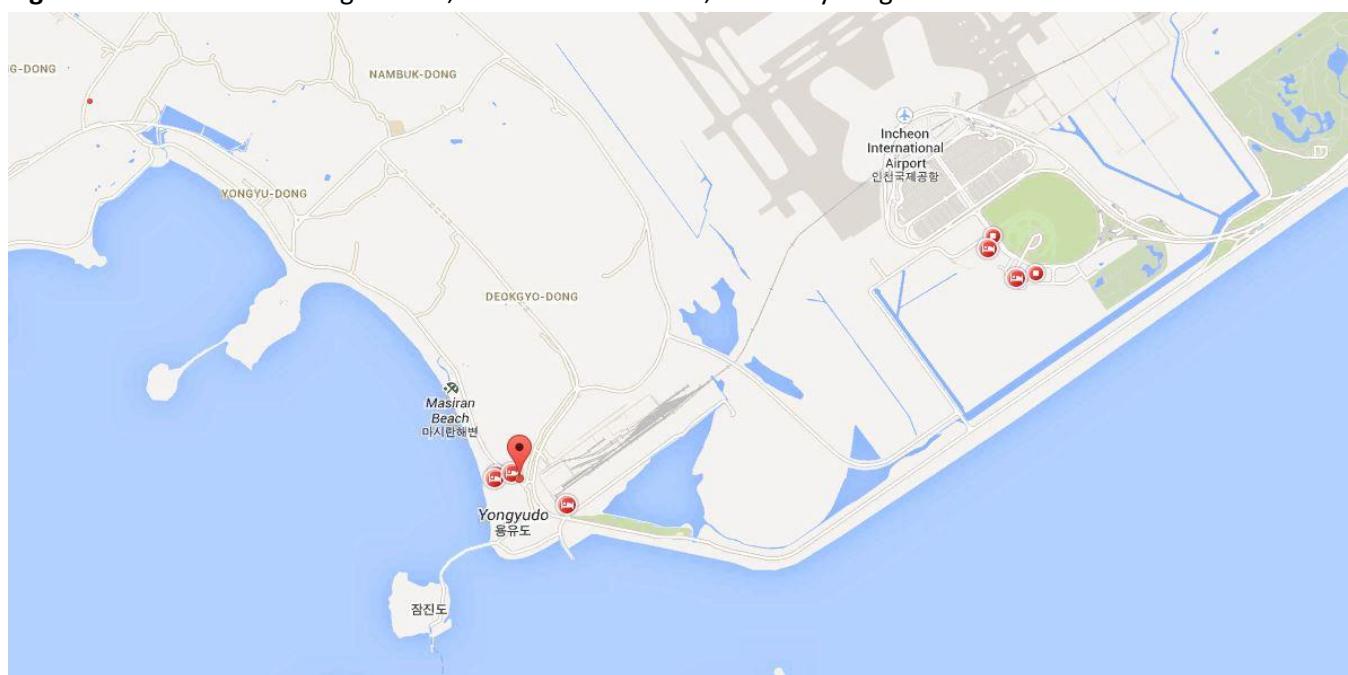
Fig. 7. My double bed at Rich Motel, Andong Intersection, a superlative deal for €34.



Fig. 8. There was a spacious whirlpool bathtub, too. Toilet and shower were in separate rooms.



Fig. 9. Double room at Orange Motel, Sokcho. Bit crowded, but everything was there.



Map 2. The location of Parkwood Hotel, and other hotels, close to the Incheon International Airport.

On the first morning, I made a one-hour walk to the seashore next to Parkwood Hotel, through a narrow belt of pine forest. The best birds included a **Peregrine Falcon**, later seen almost on a daily basis, and a lone *yunnanensis* **Olive-backed Pipit** in the forest, my only record of this uncommon winterer in Korea (common in Kyushu, across the Tsushima Strait). The extensive mudflats were too frozen to attract shorebirds and the many gulls were a bit far. With a scope, four adult **Mongolian Gulls** could be identified among the more common species. It was cold!!!

CAR RENTAL AND DRIVING IN SOUTH KOREA

I rented my car at the local Avis (call@avis.co.kr) at the Incheon International Airport, at the southern end of the building (the counter in the north was not occupied). The cost for nine days was USD 302 (€265; a rather competitive rate), including LDW and unlimited kilometers. The Kia Forte K3 had a navigator (small additional fee), as agreed, and studless winter tires, instead of the hoped for proper ones (with studs). In addition, I received snow chains for front tires, a dubious gadget I immediately disregarded as an unreliable safety measure. Only in a case of completely losing fraction on some steep hill, the chains might have become useful. It was not possible to actually drive with these flimsy appendices on (max 40 km/h?). The service was fair, even though they were a bit strict with the return time, allowing only 30 extra minutes. Because of the time-consuming registration process, I did, after all, receive my car 40 minutes later than the agreed time.



Fig. 10. Rental car pick up and drop off at Incheon International Airport. It is a bit tight spot.

An English language navigator is essential in South Korea, and requires early reservation to be available. It often is a good idea to set the navigator on highway junctions (each of them has a name), rather than villages or towns. The lettering of English names is variable and one may need to try several versions. I would also recommend buying a road map (Amazon.com) and printing Internet maps of access routes (Google Maps), as the navigator does not necessarily cover all the latest developments. On my route, one problem location was the Joonam Reservoir, which had some recently finished ramps and crossings along the toll highway.

There are numerous speed traps (automatic cameras) on the highways, and the navigator shows them. Most drivers did slow down at these spots, but others did not. One may wonder who are those people who keep on driving 30 to 60 km/h over the speed limit (in one case, about 100 km/h!) without any fear of collecting traffic violation tickets? Traffic police was a very rare sight on expressways but more common in cities and towns.

Between won 8.000 to 17.000 were spent on road tolls each day. The toll gates may at times be confusing, as the signs are too small, there is a lot of traffic, and procedures vary. In most cases, one collects a ticket and pays when exiting the toll road. Around Seoul, paying to pass is more common. Sometimes, all but one gate may be closed for renovations, and deals with all the payment methods. Leaving the Incheon Airport, I did at least one mistake, driving through an e-pass lane instead of a cash payment one, but there was no penalty. In that case, the road signs gave an impression that only the left gates allowed driving straight on, and the right ones lead straight to an intersection. Actually, the intersection was one kilometer beyond the toll gates.

Overall, the toll expressways were in very good shape and allowed fast passage between destinations. The same could be said of the numerous tunnels, which were clearly more advanced than in Japan. Only on small roads, ice and deep snow occasionally made things difficult. On the way to Gocheonam Reservoir, for example, there were half-a-meter high clumps of snow between the lanes of the narrow road, remnants of a heavy snow storm which had occurred before my visit. At Gunsan, dirty slush kept on covering my windscreen on smaller roads, as the locals overtook the slow foreigner. Fortunately, there was plenty of fluid in the windscreen washer.



Fig. 11. Another four-lane tunnel on a toll expressway. I must have passed more than 50 of them.

Twice, I almost had an accident. First, while looking for the access to Suncheon Bay, I almost collided with another car in a three-lane roundabout. At Wolgot-myeon, close to Gangwha Island, a young Korean woman ignored red lights in a four-way junction, just as I entered it on green lights. My car was partly obscured by a van illegally parked on a turning lane and she drove against the sun. It was a panic brake with locked up tires for her, and white knuckles, but we avoided collision by a margin of 20 cm! As a rule, the South Koreans are fast but good drivers, and their actions on the road are reasonably easy to predict.



Fig. 12. Parking area at a gas station/minimarket. In the background, the typical architecture of Korean suburbs.



Fig. 13. A must for Finnish birders: A twitcher's special, Bongo III 4WD! (The name refers to twitching, in Finnish).

SITES AND BIRDS

Several bird species were rather ubiquitous in South Korea, and will not be regularly mentioned in the following review of sites. These included two of my target species, **Vinous-throated Parrotbill** (*fulvicauda*) and **Elegant Bunting**, dozens (even hundreds) of which were seen on a daily basis, in right habitats. For the former species, the trip total was close to 1,000 birds. Other common species in this category were **Grey Heron** (>100), **Great Cormorant** (thousands), **Eastern Buzzard** (>100), **Eurasian Kestrel** (dozens), **Band-tailed** (hundreds), **Vega** (thousands) and **Black-headed Gull** (thousands), **Rock Dove** (hundreds), **Oriental Turtle Dove** (thousands), **(Oriental) Magpie** (hundreds; *sericea* could become a full species), **Large-billed Crow** (hundreds), **Eurasian Skylark** (>1,000), **White Wagtail** (>100), **Daurian Redstart** (dozens), **Eastern Great Tit** (>100), **Long-tailed Tit** (dozens), **Bull-headed Shrike** (only two dozen, but widespread), **Brown-eared Bulbul** (dozens), **Tree Sparrow** (hundreds) and **Oriental Greenfinch** (hundreds). All in all, I recorded 145 bird species during the nine-day visit.



Fig. 14. An **Oriental Turtle Dove**, one of the abundant species in the fields of Korea.

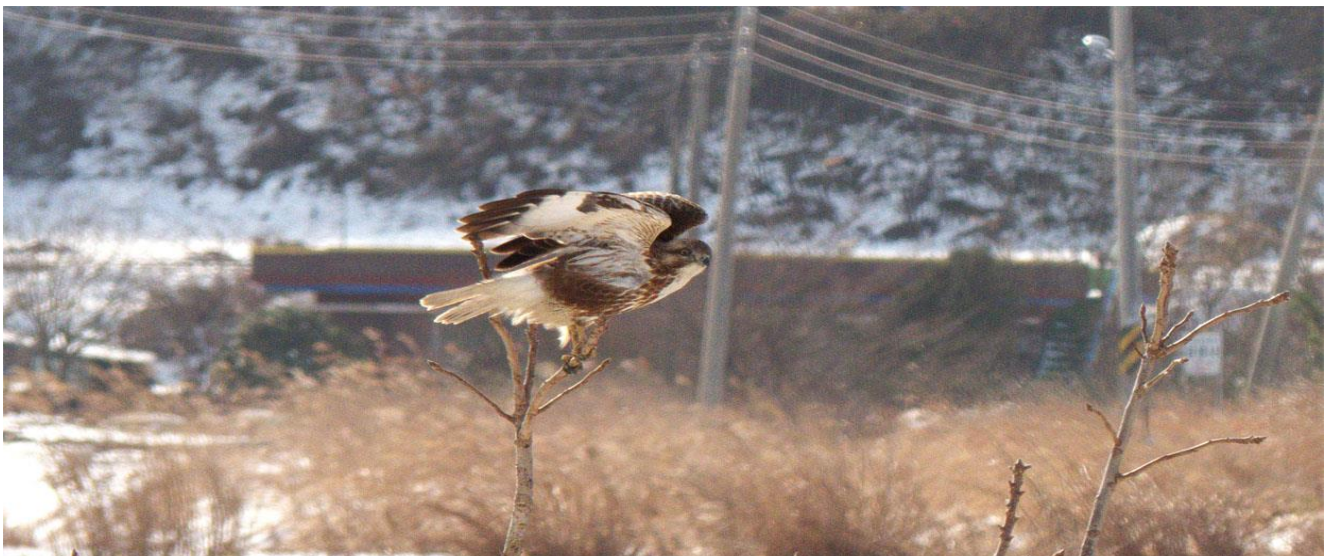


Fig. 15. An **Eastern Buzzard**, another frequently seen species.

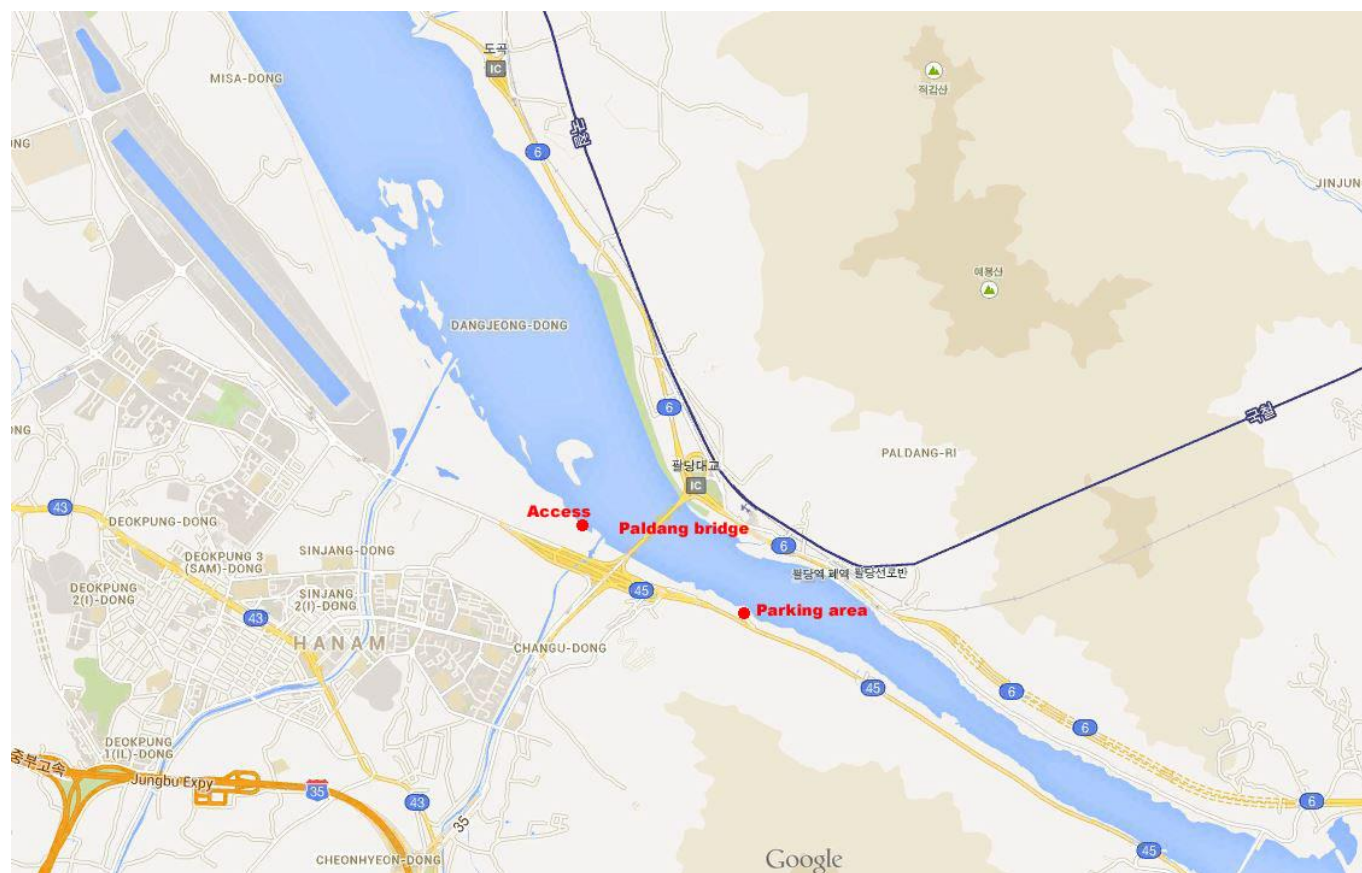


Fig. 16. Open stream S of the main entrance and visitor parking (**Mandarin Ducks, Brown Dipper**).



Fig. 17. The best snipe feeding area, just north of the main entrance bridge (only bird there was a **Grey Heron**).

PALDANG (Han River W of Seoul): Short afternoon visit, 16.15-17.15. Temperature -5 C, clear and sunny, strong W wind, 2 to 3 cm of snow on the ground.



Map. 4. The Paldang section of the Han River, east of metropolitan Seoul, with some access information.

The Paldang section of the Han River attracts wintering wildfowl and **Steller's Sea Eagles**. I had no luck with the latter. After the time-consuming Road 47, there was not enough time to explore the Paldang area for alternative entry points. I therefore focused my observations south of the Paldang Bridge, where diving ducks and most of the **Whooper Swans** appeared to concentrate, right next to the observation point.

There was an easy access to a restaurant parking area overlooking the river, from where I scoped the valley, including part of the river north of the Paldang Bridge. It may be a good idea to park one's car away from the actual parking spaces, to minimize disturbance. On the western bank, beyond the bridge, a construction site provided another access, but the variety of wildfowl was less interesting there. The river was almost completely free of ice, with little snow on its banks. It was, however, rather cold in the afternoon wind. Two woolen sets of long underwear, double mittens, a hood and two pairs of wool socks, worn under winter trousers, coat and a pair of Icebug shoes, did the job of keeping me warm and kept on doing so throughout the journey.

The wildfowl included: **Whooper Swans** (120), **Eastern Spotbilled Ducks** (30), **Mallards** (140), a **Northern Pintail**, **Common Pochards** (600 in one tight party), **Tufted Ducks** (40), **Common Goldeneyes** (180), **Smews** (3) and **Goosanders** (50). As the light started to fade, I hurried south towards Seosan Lakes. The idea was to leave the greater Seoul area before complete darkness. Driving on the busy eight lane expressways was easier when not blinded by the lights of oncoming traffic. The congested roads were soon left behind and driving was easy afterwards.



Fig. 18. The restaurant parking area. The Paldang Bridge towers in the back, in late afternoon sun.

SEOSAN LAKES (W of Galsan Jct): Extended morning visit 7.00-14.30. Temperature -12 to -3 C, clear and sunny, relatively calm, 2 to 8 cm of snow but open waters.



Map. 5. The Seosan Lakes. The Lake B embankment road starts by the red dot, at the east end of the bridge.

Seosan Lakes is one of the top birding areas in South Korea. It consists of two reclamation areas, A and B. In retrospect, my strategy worked very well for a short visit. For the most of the morning, I focused on the eastern lake (area B), starting at Gung-ri, turning left under the Road 96 and following an embankment which bordered the lake in the east. There was some construction going on at Gisan-ri, and especially the first part of the track was consequently muddy. Fortunately, the track was also frozen because of the -12C night! It would probably not have been possible to pass in a sedan if the temperature was above zero. The lake was very close on the left, with rising sun behind my back, and there were birdy fields on the right. Hundreds of the **White-fronted** (5.000), **Tundra Bean Geese** (1.000) and **Taiga Bean Geese** (10) stopped on the fields right next to the lake, together with a lone **Ruddy Shelduck**, after leaving their roost early in the morning. They were also joined by **Whooper Swans** (5) and **Hooded Cranes** (51). The cranes were frequently calling and added to the special atmosphere of the site.

At Lake B, I got my best flight views of an adult **Steller's Sea Eagle**, a magnificent predator, in addition to three **White-tailed Sea Eagles** (1 adult, 2 1st calendar year birds). The wildfowl included **Eastern Spotbilled Ducks** (1.100), **Mallards** (2.500), **Gadwalls** (120), **Shovelers** (30), **Northern Pintails** (3), **Eurasian Teals** (60), **Falcated Ducks** (3), **Common Pochards** (80), **Tufted Ducks** (120), **Common Goldeneyes** (80, including Lake A), **Red-breasted Mergansers** (50, including A) and **Goosanders** (200, including A). Separate of a few **Black-necked Grebes**, a **Slavonian Grebe** was feeding at the edge of a marshy islet, together with 180 **Common Coots**. In addition to the common herons and cormorants the area also had a party of 25 **Great Egrets**. My first shorebirds in South Korea, three **Grey Plovers**, were seen there, too.

Later in the day, I crisscrossed the eastern fields, before returning to the main road. The grid of field tracks provided convenient access and there were fair numbers of passerines, particularly along the various small rivers and channels. My first **Japanese Quail** was a short-lived one, being caught and killed by a lucky **Amur Leopard Cat**. The cats were common in the area, if judged by footprints. They looked very different from their tropical cousins, such as the *bengalensis* **Leopard Cat** I have seen in Peninsular Malaysia.

Other birds included *karpowi* **Ring-necked Pheasants**, a **Merlin**, a **Black Kite** (as an IOC follower, I do not recognize 'Black-eared Kite'), **Eurasian Skylarks**, **White Wagtails**, dozens of **Buff-bellied Pipits** (*japonicus*; **Siberian Pipit**), my first **Chinese Penduline Tit**, no less than 350 **Vinous-throated Parrotbills**, **Bramblings**, 20 **Pine Buntings** in mixed parties with the **Bramblings**, a **Black-faced Bunting**, at least 40 **Pallas's Reed Buntings** and a lone **Lapland Bunting**, easily located by its calls (abundant migratory species where I live, uncommon winter visitor in Korea).

In the early afternoon, a short visit to Lake A (West) was also made, before realizing how barren it actually was. The lake was, however, good for grebes, **Common Goldeneyes** and mergansers: e.g. **Great Crested Grebe** (at least 250) and **Black-necked Grebe** (60, including a dozen at Lake B). My daily **Peregrine Falcon** hunted along the embankment road (turn right just before the second barrage bridge, and follow the lake shore). On the way between the lakes, there were some good fields to the north of Road 96. There was also a rather convenient observation point on a barrage bridge of Lake B, great for gulls and eagles in particular. In addition to common gulls, a surprising number of **Saunders's Gulls** (20) were seen there, and at Lake A. There was a dead **Korean Water Deer** on the bridge, apparently killed by a truck in the previous night.

On the way towards Gunsan, a roadside **Hill Pigeon** was soon spotted, in an area on forested hills. The previous time I had seen the species was in Irkutsk, Siberia, where the species is quite common.

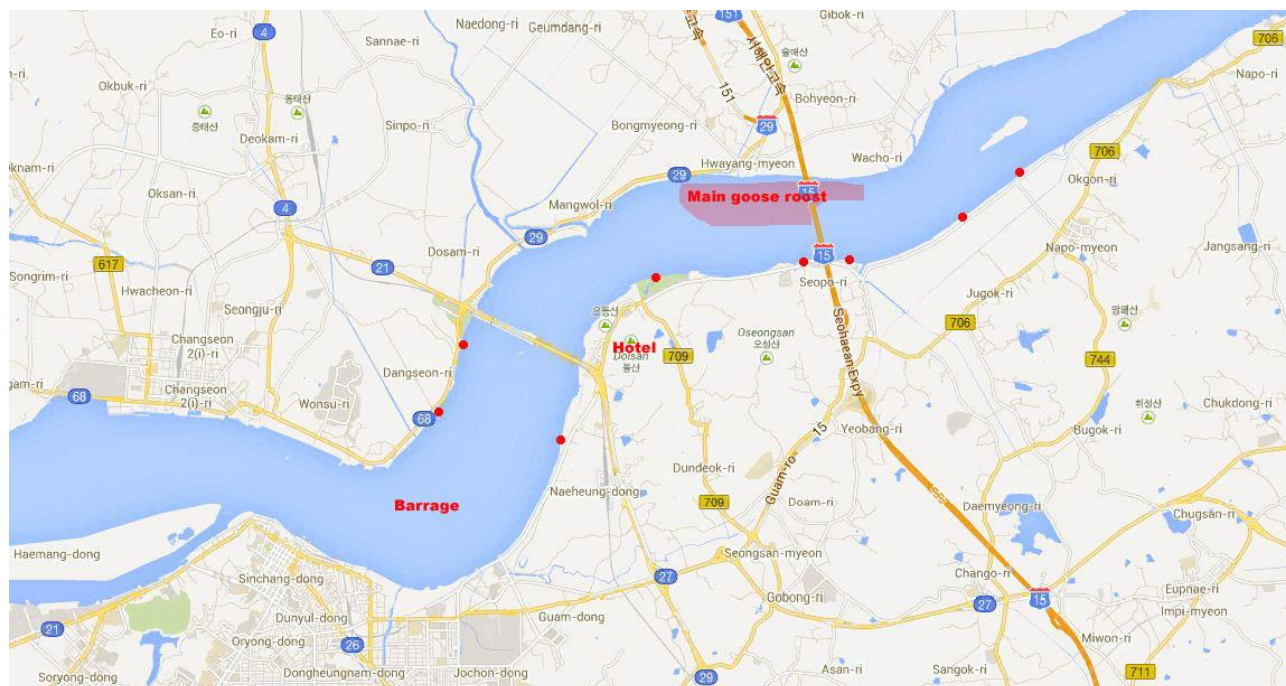


Fig. 19. The Seosan Lake B eastern embankment road, conveniently frozen for easy driving.



Fig. 20. A reedy channel east of Lake B, a favorite habitat of wintering **Pallas's Reed** and other buntings.

GEUM RIVER (Gunsan): First, afternoon visit 15.40-17.45; second, morning trip 7.05-9.30. Temperature -5 C, mostly sunny, light wind, more than 5 cm of melting snow on ground.



Map 6. The Geum River at Gunsan, and the location of main roosting and foraging areas, and the my observation points.

On arrival, I had no idea where the birds were and therefore checked the mouth of the Geum River, driving through deep slush. After returning to the east, along the northern shore, the abundant birdlife between the Road 21 bridge and the island of Haemang-dong was discovered. This is the Geum Barrage area, where one should focus on, unless looking for the massive winter concentration of **Baikal Teals**, or geese, up the river.

The teals were not there in December 2014, with the exception of odd individuals. I saw my first pair north of Dangseon-ri, close to the bridge, and the excellent sunlit views were the best I ever had of the species in South Korea. At Geum River, major investment has been made in birdwatching tourism, apparently based on the mass occurrence of the **Baikal Teal**. Their unpredictability is, however, a major challenge to the business, to say the least! Lay bird-spotters arrive and expect to see hundreds of thousands of **Baikal Teals** and may in fact see none.

The majority of the waterfowl, shorebirds and gulls roost and feed on the southern shore mudflats, below the barrage. A good vantage point for scope observations has been marked on the Map 6. In there, it is possible to drive off the street and park right above the mudflats. Other good spots are marked on the northern shore. In retrospect, I should have tried the Road 29, too. Many geese flew into that direction.

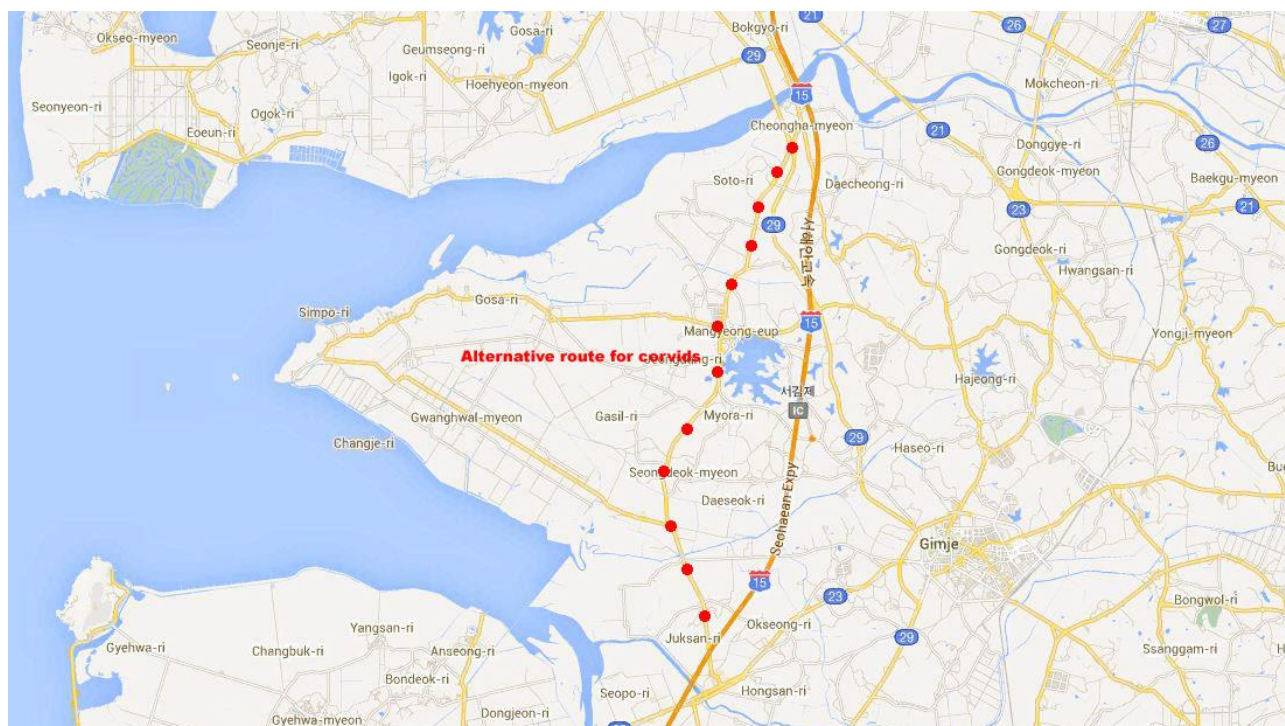
The birds of the Geum River included **Little Grebes** (10), **Great Crested Grebes** (180), **Common Shelducks** (2.500), **Eastern Spotbilled Ducks** (4.000), **Mallards** (10.000), **Gadwalls** (50), a **Eurasian Wigeon**, **Northern Pintails** (4), **Eurasian Teals** (500), **Common Pochards** (300), **Tufted Ducks** (400), **Goosanders** (40), **Common Goldeneyes** (60) and **Common Coots** (60). All the shorebirds were at the barrage: A single *osculans* **Eurasian Oystercatcher**, **Grey Plovers** (2), **Eurasian Curlews** (12), a **Common Sandpiper**, **Sanderlings** (20), **Dunlins** (1.000) and a **Red-necked Stint**. In the morning, a **Peregrine Falcon** carried its prey across the river there. **Mongolian Gulls** were common, and to my relief, also a lone **Relict Gull** strutted on the mud. At least one **Temminck's Cormorant** had joined the hundreds of common ones. Passerines were scarce in the open tidal habitat.

I was also misguided to visit a park (green area, E of Road 21 bridge) with observation hides to try to observe the river from there, but neither the views nor birds (**Ring-necked Pheasants**, **Long-tailed Tits**, **Azure-winged Magpies**) offered much compensation for the effort. The gigantic **Baikal Teal** 'statue' was, however, an impressive sight. I suppose many lay visitors are content to photograph their children with it and to observe an exhibition of **Baikal Teal** photos. It is not absolutely necessary to see the birds, if one is not a birder!

Further east, a geese roost was eventually discovered on an islet below the Highway 15 bridge. In order to observe the birds, I had to park in an uncomfortable spot right next to a bus stop. There were 60 **Taiga Bean Geese**, 1,500 **Tundra Bean Geese** and 5,000 **White-fronted Geese**, 30 **Whooper Swans**, together with a lone **Hooded Crane** and five **Great Egrets**. **Swan Geese** have previously been seen in the area, also in winter 2014-2015, and I was primarily looking for them. As a result, any geese parties had to be carefully scrutinized.

Towards Napo (no, we are not in Ecuador!), three sites for observation had been constructed. I enjoyed the possibility to park and a few birds (e.g. 16 **Whooper Swans**) could be recorded by walking away from the fenced 'observation areas', for unobstructed scope views. Somebody clearly has misunderstood the practice of observing birds, confusing it with a peeping show. Well, sometimes we peep for peeps, at least in the U.S.A.... Going even further east, there were less and less birds at the river and I therefore made a U-turn at Napo-ri. The limited time was best spent at the barrage and by the Highway 15 bridge. They had thousands of birds, in comparison to the dozens upstream, and also attracted passing birds.

Leaving the Geum River at Gunsan, and passing the Saemangeum Reclamation Area on the highway (potholed section!) to the south, hundreds of (**Eastern**) **Rooks** and some *orientalis* **Carrion Crows** were noticed on the fields. Luckily, an immature **Daurian Jackdaw** stood on a highwayside fence, only few meters from the car. It was my first ever and more interesting than the pied adults, in terms of identification. The pretty adults are, however, nice too. I saw more **Daurian Jackdaws** a week later in Arasaki, Kyushu.



Map. 7. Saemangeum Reclamation area, south of Gunsan, and suggested alternative route for corvids. The distance and driving time are almost the same, stops excluded, because this section of the highway is in need of repairs and therefore slower than the rest.



Fig. 21. A Lower Geum Ecotourism Area map. I wish the texts were also in English, for international visitors.

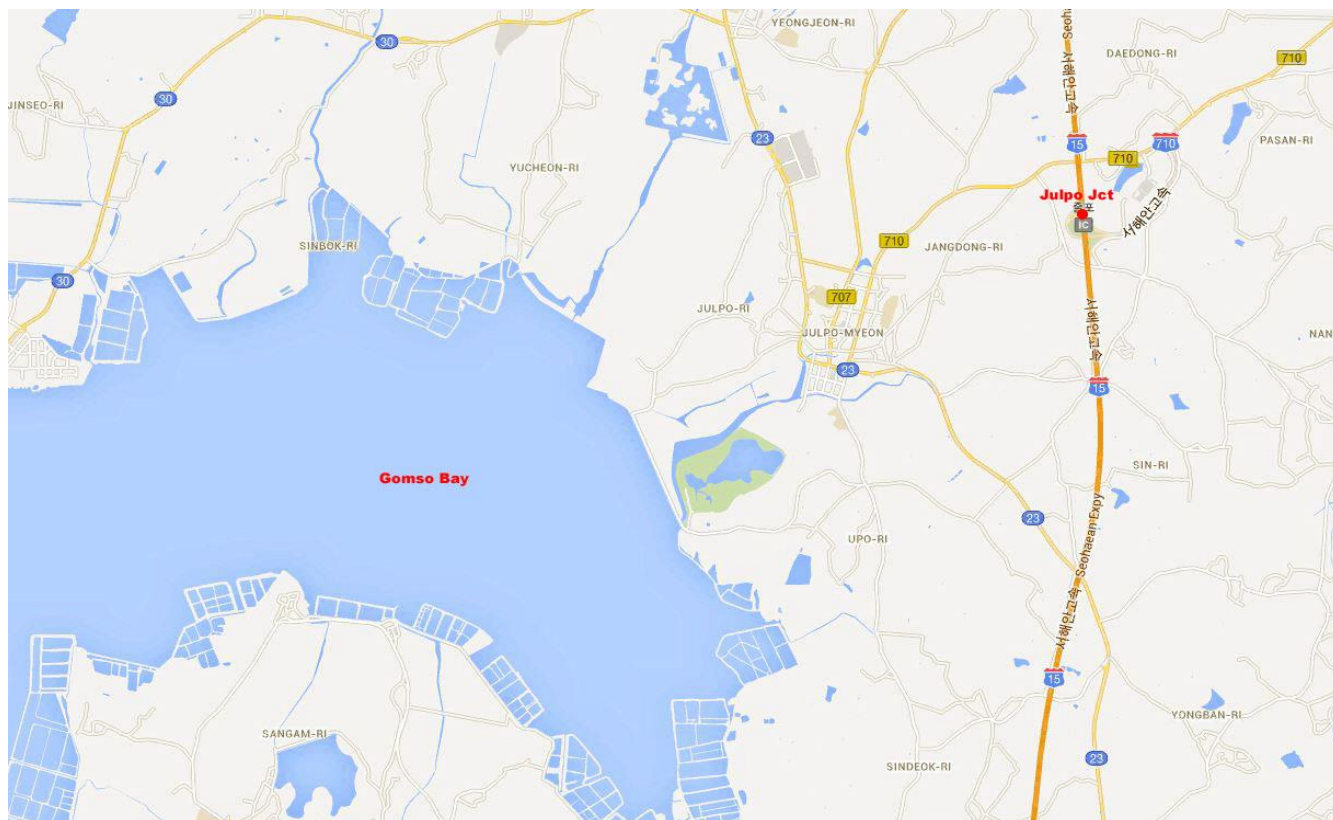


Fig. 22. A typical 'bird observation fence' at Napo-myeon, with a peeping hole at the height of one's chest.



Fig. 23. ...and the usual solution; walk where the 'observation fence' ends, a scope the river from there!

GOMSO BAY (Julpo): Short morning visit, 10.15-11.00. Temperature -5 C, with at least 10 cm of snow at Julpo. The eastern end of the Gomso Bay was completely frozen.



Map. 8. Gomso Bay and the wetland southwest of Julpo-myeon.

Given the exceptionally cold conditions, not much could be seen at Julpo – Gomso Bay area. I found a nice supermarket in the small town and almost got stuck in snow before discovering the correct way to proceed. The idea is to reach the eastern shoreline of the bay and check both the bay and the wetland (green area) from there. Both were almost completely frozen. The latter could also be approached on small side roads, some of which had been cleared of snow, but there was no point to do so at the time of the visit. Everything was frozen.

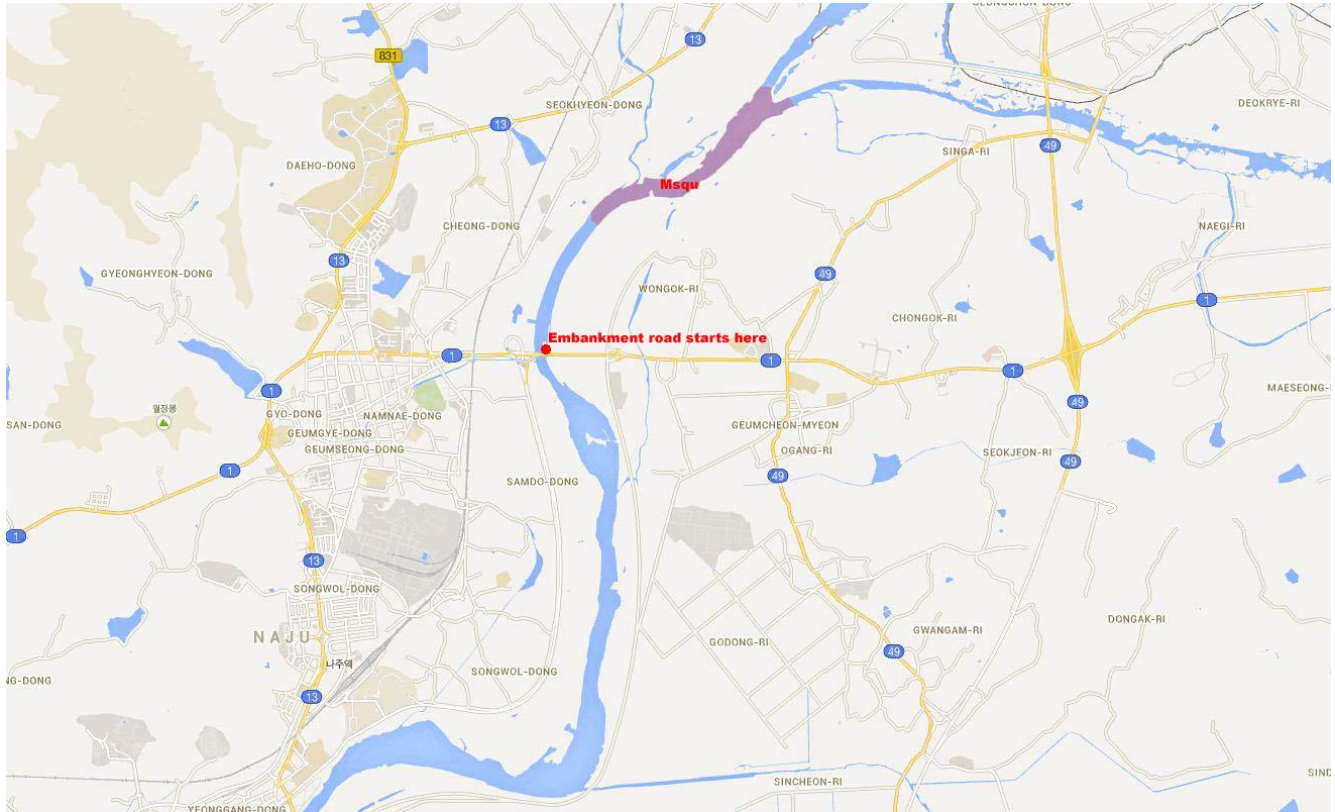
My best birds at Gomso Bay included three **Goosanders**, a lone **Great Crested Grebe**, five far away **Slaty-backed Gulls**, several **Buff-bellied/Siberian Pipits**, a **Pale Thrush** and four **Azure-winged Magpies**, in addition to the even more common, widespread species. Thrushes are relatively uncommon in South Korea in December, especially if compared to the nearby Japan, and are apparently mostly seen in the south.

After the situation had become clear, and I had accepted that the **Oriental Stork** was a more or less lost case, it was time to reconsider my timetable and proceed to Naju-si, a **Scaly-sided Merganser** stakeout, included in the route if time allowed it. In regard to **Oriental Stork**, I still hoped to see one at Gocheonam Reservoir, if lucky, but started to have serious doubts because of the snow cover. Perhaps they had escaped the conditions to the southeast or left South Korea altogether, for southern China? At this point, on the fourth day, I already regarded two target species as tentative lost cases (**Solitary Snipe**, **Oriental Stork**), but did not give up. It is never over until one's plane takes off and reaches the clouds... I would keep my bins ready even at the Incheon departure gate!



Fig. 24. Everything is frozen: Gomso Bay on the right, wetland on the left. This is the real winter; there are hardly any birds, at least no migratory ones.

NAJU-SI: Short afternoon visit, 12.15-13.30. Temperature +3 C, 2 cm of snow, overcast and calm.



Map. 9. Naju-si and the section of the river where I scored with **Scaly-sided Mergansers**. Check Google Earth.

At Naju-si, I focused on a stretch of Yeongsan River located north of the Road 1 bridge. Google Earth analysis had showed good riverine habitat and peaceful surroundings there, potentially suitable for mergansers. There also was an embankment road along the eastern shore of the river, all the way to a dam in the north, and considerable distance to the south, too. Exiting north at the eastern end of the Road 1 bridge, I soon found out that viewing the river was difficult in the beginning. There was a reedy park-like leisure area for jogging, cycling etc. (so called 'developed green area') there, and no access for cars. The opposite side had orchards all the way. The conditions did, however, improve soon enough, with less distance to the water. Some problems were caused by local drivers on the narrow embankment. Several of them insisted on driving at top speed. It was therefore important to park as close to edge of the road as possible. Towards the dam, there was a rest stop with parking space.

The area below the dam had some 60 **Goosanders**, two drake **Falcated Ducks** and a **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**. To my delight, two pairs of **Scaly-sided Mergansers** were also soon spotted. Discovering the species so early along the circular journey did release some time for other activities later on. Another record of interest was a noisy party arguing and feasting on apples at a nearby orchard: six **White-cheeked Starlings**, five **Common Starlings** (supposedly a scarce winter visitor), two **Dusky Thrushes** and ten **Azure-winged Magpies**.

Driving south (past Samdo-dong, Songwol-dong), towards the intersection for Hanam, I could see a number of wildfowl at the wider section of the river, too, but there was nowhere to park the car on the right side of the road. If I had had a need to check this section, too (no time for that), it would have been necessary to make a u-turn. There were spots for parking along the riverside lane of the road. Even better, I could have driven the east shore embankment road south, all the way to the next bridge (to Hanam). At the point I realized this, it was already too late for such an exploration. I needed to get to the Gocheonam Reservoir, as soon as possible.

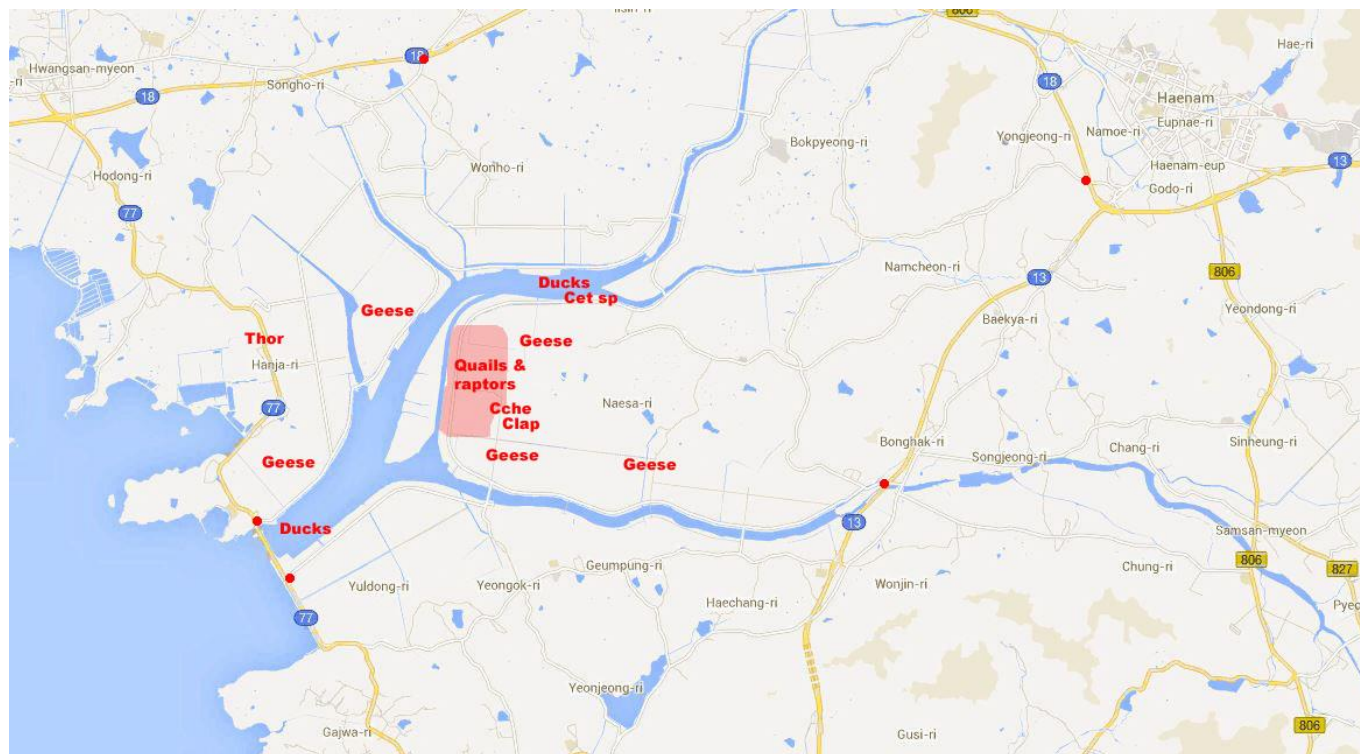


Fig. 25. An observation site along the Naju-si embankment road. The river is completely free of ice.



Fig. 26. Grey Herons were common both at natural and artificial water sources.

GOCHEONAM RESERVOIR AND FIELDS: First, afternoon visit 16.15-18.15; second, morning trip 7.40-13.15. In the afternoon, +1 C to +3 C, overcast with light rain in the evening, and 5 cm of snow. The next day, +4 C, sunny, first calm but strong winds in afternoon, the snow melting.



Map. 10. Gocheonam Reservoir, west of Haenam. Thor = **Grey-backed Thrush**, Clap = **Lapland Buntings**, Cche = **Asian Short-toed Lark**, Cet sp = **Unidentified *Cettia* Warbler**. The red area had many raptors and **Japanese Quails**, as described in the text.

Hurrying south from Naju-si, I made a decision: According to maps, the general area between Mokpo and Haenam had plenty of fields and small wetlands, averagely good for birds and birding. For a traveling birder, it was nevertheless sensible to focus on the one really good location, the Gocheonam Reservoir and the fields around it. By visiting the area twice, I would not only gain deeper understanding of the site, but would be able to see both the evening and morning birds. With some speeding, I was able to arrive there at 16.15, despite slow driving for the last 30 kilometers, caused by difficult road conditions (snow and ice on the road) and an **Osprey** on the way. The very slow driving in the end had its perks, such as roadside **Pale** and **Dusky Thrushes**. There was also a surprise **Grey-backed Thrush** (a male), a winter vagrant probably forced there by the blizzard which had drastically changed the conditions few days earlier. I had definitely not expected to see the species in Korea in December, even though some of them migrate to South China pretty late in the season (November).

Gocheonam Reservoir is a site which deserved days of birding to give it full justice. The reservoir is surrounded by a good tarmac embankment road, which was mostly covered by snow at the time of the visit. It helped to know, however, that there was no mud under the whiteness. The extensive fields around the reservoir had grids of roads and field tracks, most of which could be safely driven by a sedan (some could not). In the evening, I drove around the reservoir, staying on tarmac, and was able to complete 75% of the drive before darkness. In the morning, I did the same twice, counterclockwise, with much attention paid on the fields, because I kept on missing the **Swan Goose**, despite the tens of thousands of geese already in the notebook. I left the area for Haenam and Suncheon Bay at 13.15, when the wind had become too strong for scope observations.

One of the highlights of the trip occurred in the evening, at dusk, when the temperature was rising (+3 C) with light rain. I had stopped in a section with many birds of prey (and apparently also rodents), a **Eurasian Kestrel** (saw 12 the next day), three **Eastern Buzzards**, an **Eastern Marsh Harrier**, no less than 12 **Hen Harriers** and also a **Northern Long-eared Owl**, when a female **Japanese Quail** was spotted at the edge of the road, in a shadow under a tall clump of grass. I turned the headlights on to admire the bird. At the same time, two males started calling at a nearby field. Turning the car a bit, I lighted the field and saw another quail flying towards us, following the light beams. It landed in the long grass behind the female, while the two males kept on calling. **Japanese Quails** must have been common there and the change in weather had triggered territorial behavior, far south from their breeding grounds. Well, **Common Quails** also sometimes call in winter in the Middle East and Africa, too. Overall, it was a very nice end for an 11 hour winter birding day.

The reservoir had **Common Shelducks** (2), **Eastern Spotbilled Ducks** (5.000), **Mallards** (6.000), **Shovelers** (8), **Northern Pintails** (8), **Gadwalls** (3.000), **Eurasian Wigeons** (6), **Eurasian Teals** (300), **Common Pochards** (12), **Tufted Ducks** (2), a **Smew** and **Common Goldeneyes** (10), in addition to **Little Grebes** (4) and **Common Coots** (100). The latter could be seen on the fields, too, in search of food, running across expanses of white snow at dusk. The wintering geese included **Taiga Bean Geese** (200), **Tundra Bean Geese** (3.000) and **White-fronted Geese** (12.000). The geese kept on moving around and consequently gave me hours of sorting out, in vain hope of a **Swan Goose**. It does not regularly occur this far south, but could have been pushed there by the weather.

Among vagrants or scarce winter visitors, my second, third and fourth **Lapland Bunting** were discovered at the eastern fields, one in the late afternoon and two in the morning (Map 10). A large and agitated dark brown **Bush Warbler** (*Cettia* sp.) was briefly seen and heard at roadside reeds and grass at the northeastern end of the reservoir, but could unfortunately not be specifically identified. In this habitat, it probably was a **Japanese Bush Warbler**. In the morning, when scanning passerines from the car, an adult **Asian Short-toed Lark**, rare in Korea, landed on the gravel field track right next to me, but soon left, flying northwest. No **Oriental Storks** (sigh...)!

Ring-necked Pheasants were common in the wet grass around the reservoir. Other birds included **Great Egrets** (3), three subadult **White-tailed Sea Eagles** (one party), **Hen Harriers** (20), a **Northern Goshawk**, a **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**, an adult and a juvenile **Peregrine Falcons** together, a **Saunders's Gull** away from the sea (!), many **Eurasian Skylarks** (500) and **Buff-bellied/Siberian Pipits** (100), **Black-faced** and **Masked Buntings** (3), a **Reed Bunting** and **Pallas's Reed Buntings** (30). The site also had my largest numbers of **Oriental Turtle Doves** in South Korea, more than 1.000 during the morning visit. There was a carcass of a **Raccoon Dog** on a field track, too. Three live **Korean Water Deer** were, however, a more interesting sight.



Fig. 27. Always a joy to watch and listen, many **Vinous-throated Parrotbills** were seen in Korea, on a daily basis.

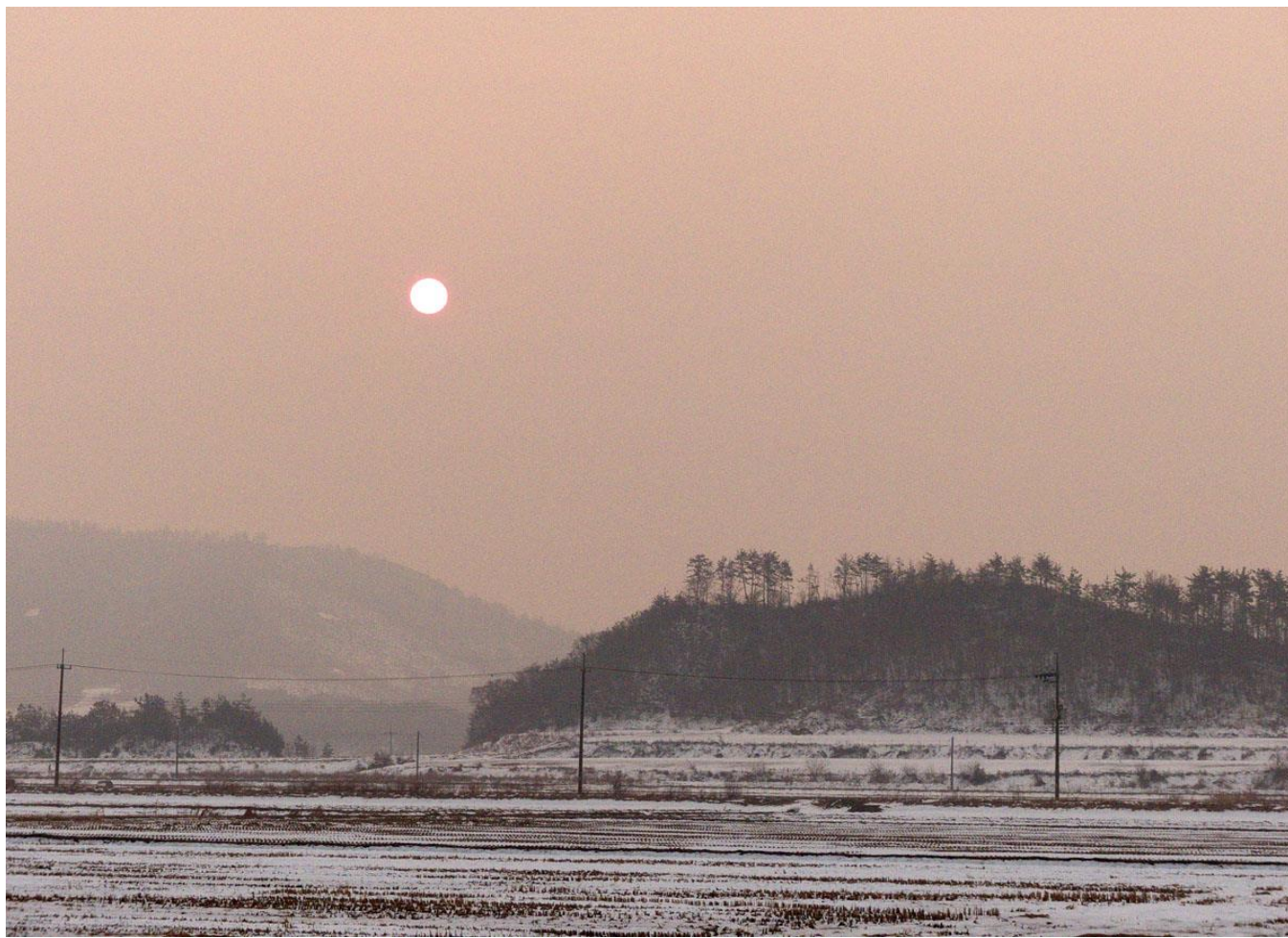
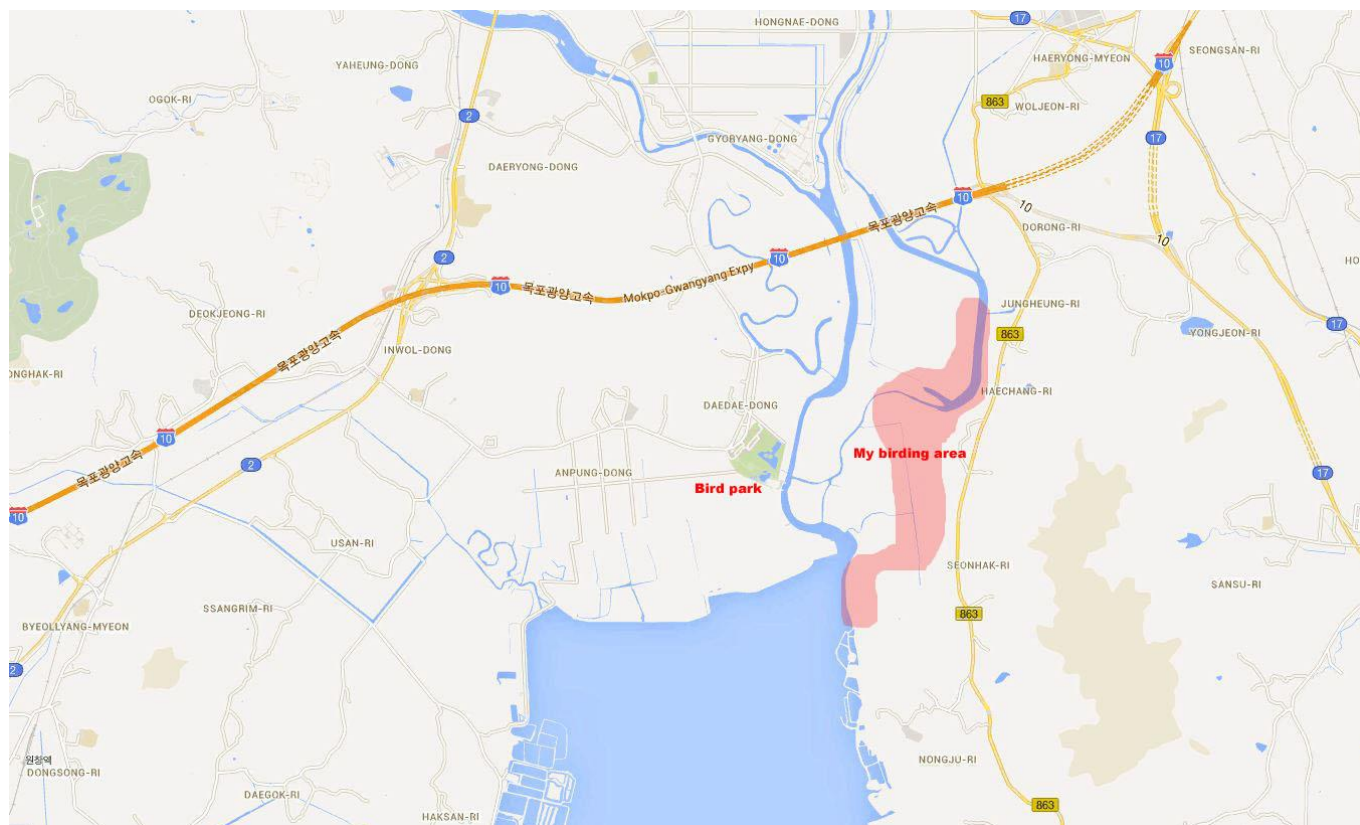


Fig. 28. The fields of Gocheonam, in early morning mist, after a humid, above-zero night.



Fig. 29. Hungry and therefore bold, **Eurasian Coots** explored the fields at dusk, after a heavy snowfall.

SUNCHEON BAY (S of Suncheon): Short afternoon visit, 15.30 – 17.30. Temperature +5 C, clear sky and sunshine, relatively calm and no snow.



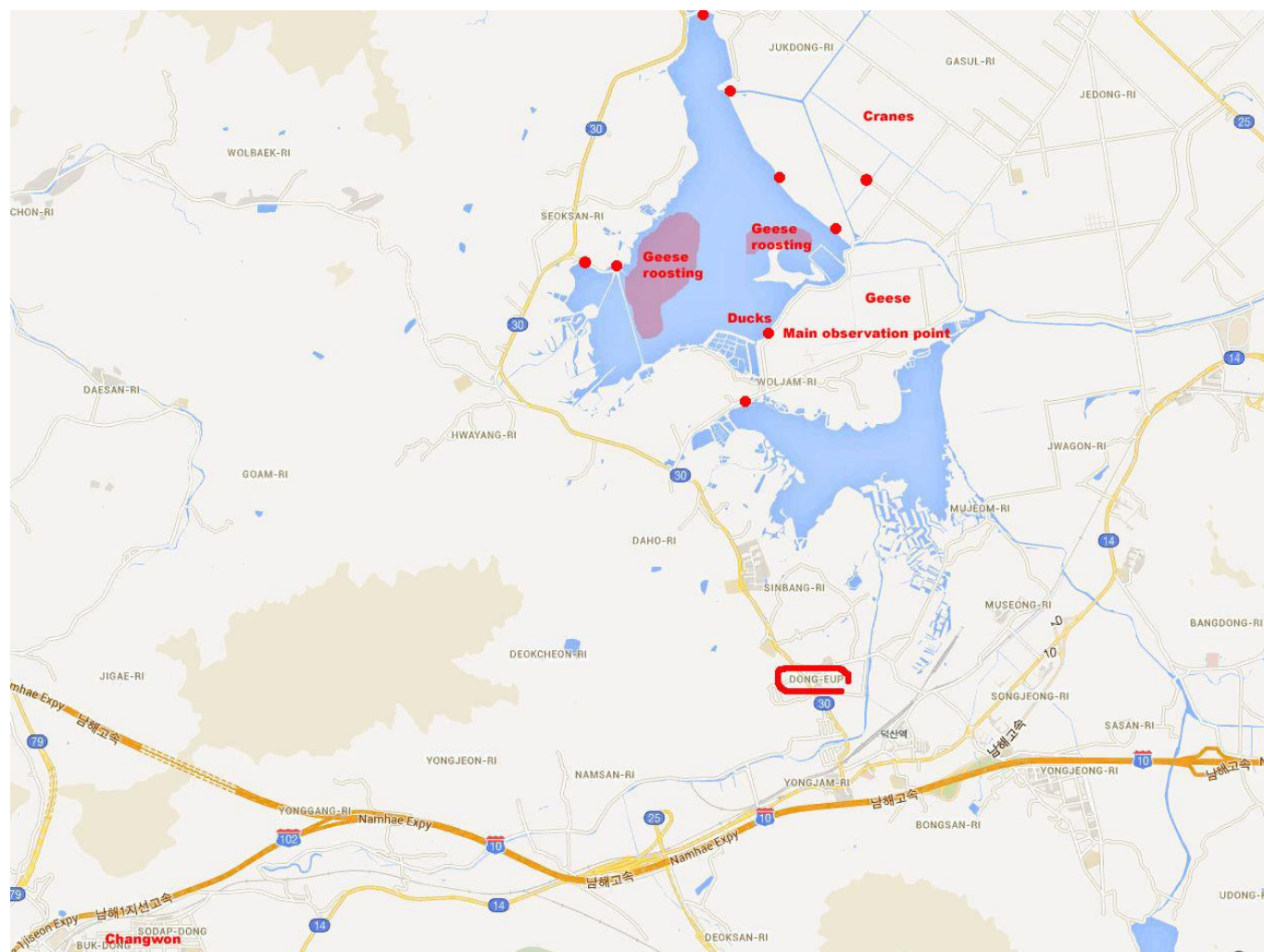
Map 11. Suncheon Bay, in a Google Maps map which I should also have had with me, to avoid getting lost...

The Bird Park at Suncheon Bay was the only location I expected to find without the help of Google Maps prints. I therefore relied on my navigator and kept on looking for signs. As a result, I got completely lost and wasted 1.5 hours south of Suncheon (all the way to Yeosu!), before discovering the estuary and some fields on the eastern side of the bay. Well, scoping the area, I was able to see the park in the west. It was full of picnicking families and the fields around it were equally full of people walking, jogging or cycling there. I doubt I missed much by birding in the east, even though the fields further west of the Bird Park could have had potential for the target species, **Chinese Grey Shrike**. No luck with the shrike in the east, the best birds there being an adult **Eurasian Spoonbill**, a family of four **Hooded Cranes**, my first and only **Northern Lapwing** in Korea, and **Grey Plovers** (2), **Dunlins** (20) and **Saunders's Gulls** (6) at the estuary. Giving up, I started to drive east to Haman before it got completely dark.



Fig. 30. A Eurasian Spoonbill, feeding in one of the agricultural channels east of Suncheon Bay.

JOONAM (YUNAM) RESERVOIR (N of Changwon): Morning visit, 7.25-10.05. Calm, clear and sunny weather, +2 C, no snow.



Map. 12. Joonam/Jonam/Yunam Reservoir, north of Changwon, with my key observation points.

Joonam (Yunam) Reservoir proved to be even better than Seosan Lakes, almost equal to Gocheonam Reservoir as an all-around birding site. As expected, the access was a bit complicated because in my maps, there was no Highway 10 intersection next to the reservoir. Driving in from the west, one had to leave the Highway 102 already at Changwon and follow Road 14 towards Joonam. At Yongjam-ri, my navigator, set to Dong-eup, got lost because of some new road arrangements, apparently also including a new highway intersection (?!). As soon as some 90 degree turns had been made under the expressway, I discovered the Road 30 through Dong-eup. Afterwards, two junctions had signs for the Yunam Bird Observation Center, first to the right and then to the left, after a view to another reservoir on the right, at Woljam-ri. The southern reservoir held mostly **Whooper Swans**.

The Joonam reservoir is the middle one in a series of three large bodies of water, and had an observation tower (once again useless, best scope views were had from an embankment next to it). In the morning, geese flew right overhead, to the fields in the east. Most of the ducks dabbled in front of the observation site, which also allowed great scope views of most of the wetland. It was possible to drive around the middle reservoir. There was a narrow but drivable road behind the eastern embankment, with an observation site for the lake and views and access to the fields. Towards the end of the track, drive down right (not up left in the Y-fork) in-between buildings before turning left to a bridge at the north end of the reservoir. I also checked the large reservoir (third one) immediately to the north, and a small one beyond it, but they did not have much to see.

The larger wildfowl at the reservoir included **Taiga Bean Geese** (100; particularly easy to observe there), **Tundra Bean Geese** (600), **White-fronted Geese** (1,400) and **Whooper Swans** (1,200). Among the smaller species, **Common Shelducks** (8), **Eastern Spotbilled Ducks** (400), **Mallards** (over 1,000), **Shovelers** (400), **Northern Pintails** (100), **Eurasian Wigeons** (20), **Eurasian Teals** (100), **Falcated Ducks** (24), **Baikal Teals** (14), **Common Pochards** (60), a **Tufted Duck**, **Common Goldeneyes** (5), **Smews** (26) and a **Goosander** were recorded, in addition to ten **Great Crested Grebes** and **Common Coots**.

The visit was very productive in terms of rare species, too. The best one was a female **Blue-winged Teal**, well visible at the main observation point. I do not know if the species has ever been recorded in South Korea, even though it is an abundant duck with high degree of vagrancy. At the same point, a pair of vagrant **Ferruginous Ducks** was another nice find. As far as I was able to see, they did not appear to be hybrids. At the northern end of the reservoir, a single drake **Baer's Pochard** was discovered. The species (beware of hybrids) is today considered 'accidental' in Korea, even though they regularly winter there and in Japan. At least one **Lesser White-fronted Goose** was among its larger cousins. I first spotted it by its calls, familiar to people with experience of the species.

Twelve **Eurasian Spoonbills** were roosting at the southwestern corner of the reservoir, at a separate section. Six **Great Egrets** preferred the northern end. A tired-looking **Peregrine Falcon** was trying to rest in a dead tree at the main observation point, right in the middle of the masses of ducks and swans, which probably had made terrible din in the previous night. Other birds of prey were two adult **White-tailed Sea Eagles** and two **Eurasian Sparrowhawks**, in addition to buzzards and kestrels. A most impressive sight was party of 110 **White-naped Cranes**. They flew low across the lake, landing on the fields, in bright morning sun. Other birds at Joonam Reservoir included two **Mongolian Gulls**, two **Eurasian Wrens**, **Dusky Thrushes** (SW shore observation point) and *japonicus* **Buff-bellied/Siberian Pipits**.



Fig. 31. The main observation site, another 'observation fence'...



Fig. 32. ...and a view to the lake, full of birds, including vagrant wildfowl.

In regard to the vagrant winter ducks at Joonam Reservoir, I wonder why there was nothing on them at the Birds Korea home page. Perhaps nobody had been to the reservoir on the third week of December? Well, there clearly were many photographs of them locally. Especially the **Ferruginous Ducks** were targeted by a number of long lenses. (Photos of major rarities have been left out of this report).

NAKDONG DELTA (Busan): Morning visit, 10.50-12.00. Relatively calm weather, clear and sunny, +3 C, no snow.

In order to reach Busan and the Nakdong River delta, I returned to Highway 10, veered right to Highway 6 before the city, turned right to Road 1047, and left to Road 2 in order to cross the Nakdong River. At the end of the second bridge, I turned right, driving south towards Dadaepo Beach. As soon as sandy islets appeared on the right, I started to make stops to scan them for birds. Finding a place to park was not a problem and it did not take too long to check the eastern side of the delta.

It was rather windy and many of the gulls and shorebirds were too far for identification. I was nevertheless happy with the results. In order to drive north to Pohang and Guryongpo Peninsula, I returned along the arrival route to the Highway 6 intersection, crossing it straight north. From there on, driving was fast and easy with the help of a navigator, with the exception of Gyeongju, which however had 400 **Rooks**, and therefore also potential for **Daurian Jackdaws** (none were seen).

The one hour visit produced the following species (excluding the previously listed ubiquitous ones): **Common Shelducks** (40), **Eastern Spotbilled Ducks** (150), **Mallards** (200), **Eurasian Wigeons** (6), **Common Goldeneyes** (3), **Red-breasted Mergansers** (4), **Great Crested Grebes** (10), **Black-necked Grebes** (30), **Eurasian Spoonbills** (10), **White-tailed Sea Eagles** (1 adult, 1 3rd calendar year bird), a **Black Kite**, an **Osprey**, a **Eurasian Oystercatcher**, **Sanderlings** (2), **Dunlins** (30), **Grey Plovers** (10), **Eurasian Curlews** (3), **Band-tailed Gulls** (10), **Common Gulls** (300; *kamtschatschensis*), **Slaty-backed Gulls** (8), a **Relict Gull** (2nd calendar year, with close views) and **Saunders's Gulls** (2). Unfortunately, the wintering **Steller's Sea Eagle** did not show up.

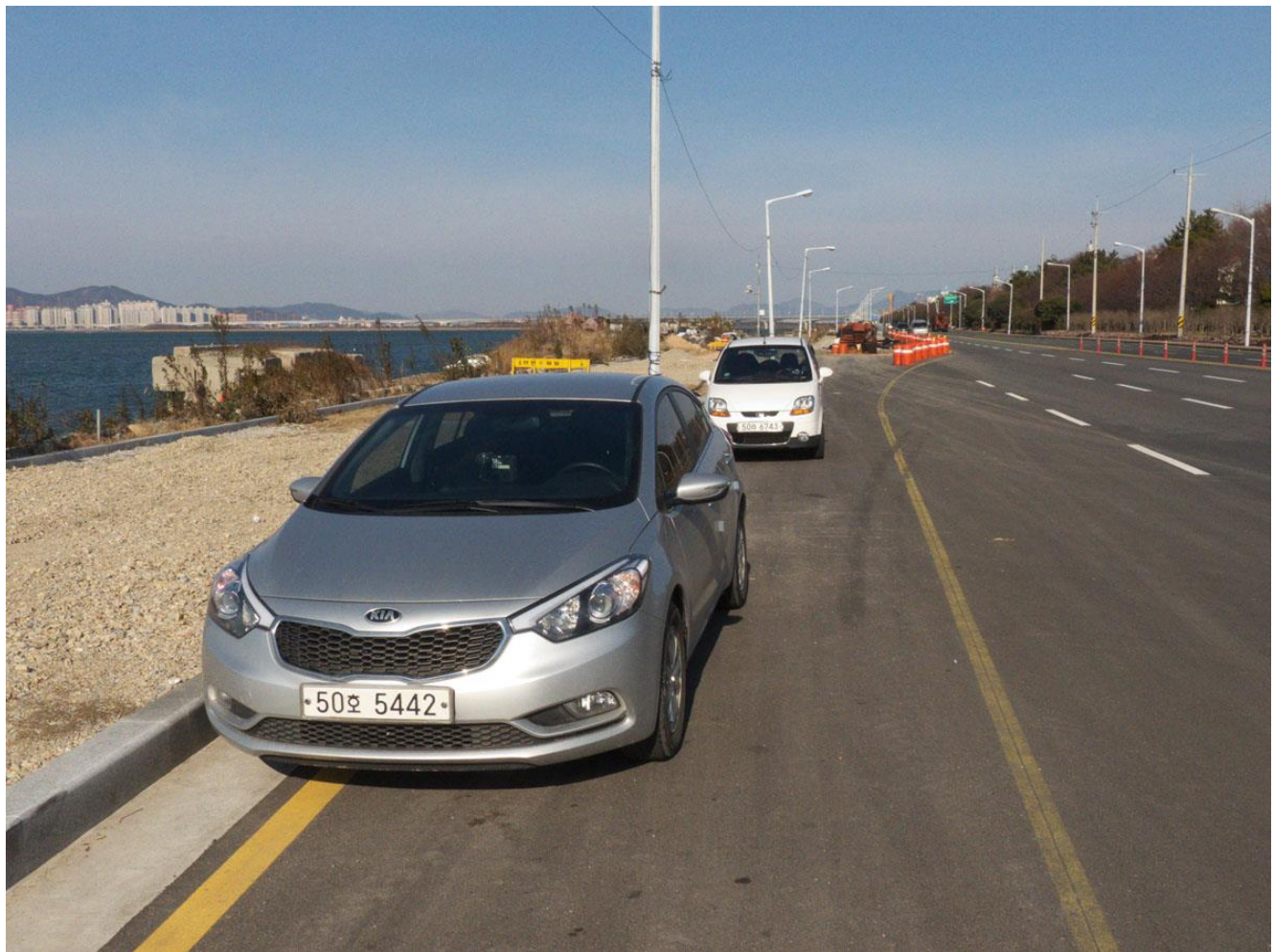


Fig. 33. At Nakdong Delta, parking along the seaside boulevard was not a problem.

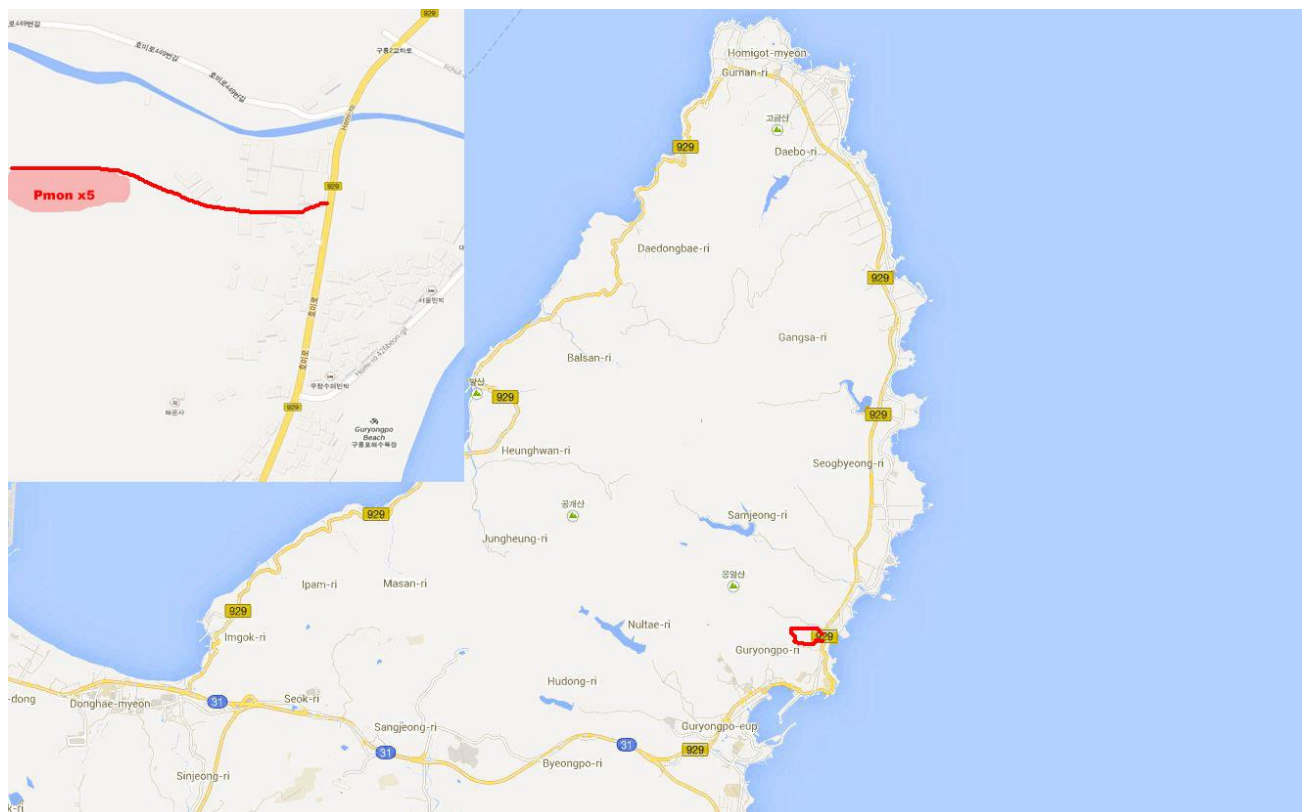
GURYONGPO PENINSULA (Pohang): Afternoon visit, 14.45 – 15.30. Light wind, +3 C, clear and sunny, no snow.

As strange it may sound to a Korean reader, I went to Guryongpo Peninsula only for **Siberian Accentors**, and left relatively soon after discovering the species. In the Internet, there was information that the species was not uncommon there, at overgrown fields. At the site, access to such habitat proved to be a bit complicated, because of private roads and other fenced areas. Nevertheless, an ideal site was discovered soon enough, at the northern edge of Guryongpo-eup/ri, a busy coastal town with many seafood stalls. In this report, its location is published in Map 13. A birder never has enough stakeouts which allow car access and therefore save time for other sites.

Beyond Guryongpo Beach, while approaching a river crossing and a right-hand junction to Sanjeng-ri, I noticed a small concrete road to a small valley on the left. Driving in-between buildings, I proceeded some 150 (?) meters and parked left after at a bridge. On the left, there was a 'wall' of thorny scrub and low bushes, the kind of place I would skulk in if I was an accentor. In fact, I could immediately hear one calling. The place was in a shadow and therefore colder than the rest of the valley but nevertheless productive. After playing an mp3 file for five seconds, three **Siberian Accentors** appeared in front of me and could be observed for a prolonged period, until a vivacious party of 30 **Vinous-throated Parrotbills** arrived and boldly took the front stage. Altogether, no less than five accentors appeared at the site, two more further up the road.

Having scored with the target species at once, I spent the rest of time driving the coastal road (parallel to 929) north and stopped at places from where the practically empty sea could be seen. The most notable birds were a **Northern Goshawk** and a dozen of **Slaty-backed Gulls**. Unfortunately, there was no time to sort the gulls out to

gain South Korea lifers. Instead, I drove to Pohang and started my late afternoon drive to Daegu and Andong, arriving at the final destination one hour after sunset, in -15 C winter conditions.



Map 13. Guryongpo Peninsula, and the location of easy-to-access **Siberian Accentor** habitat.



Fig. 34. A site with five **Siberian Accentors**, at a 'wall of scrub'. The main road junction looms in the background.

SPECULATIVE SITES FOR SCALY-SIDED MERGANSERS

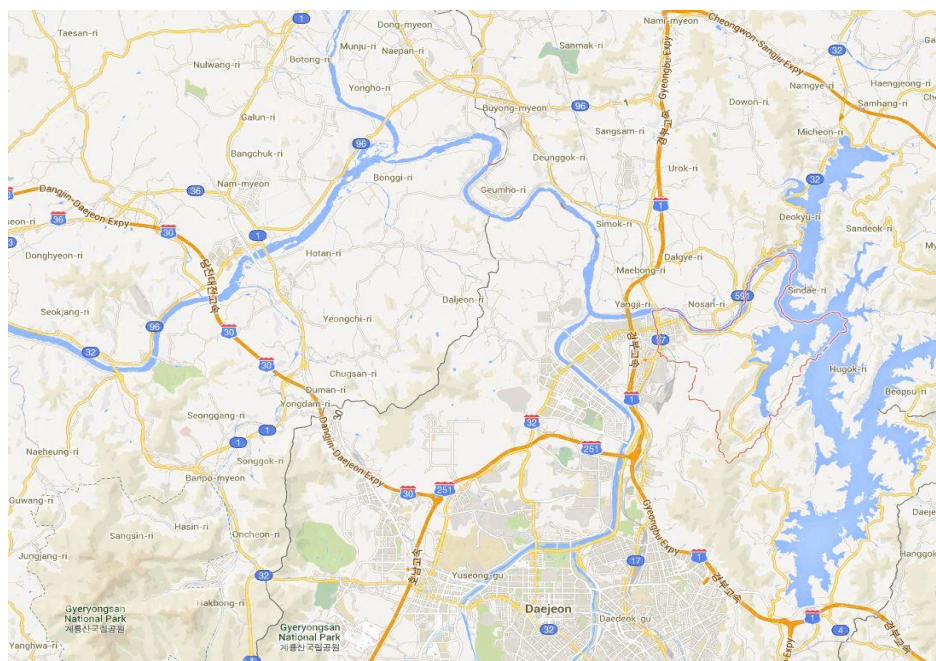
Perhaps the most frustrating feature about South Korean birding is the secrecy around wintering **Scaly-sided Mergansers**. In 2014, a Birds Korea survey counted 149 individuals at a number of sites (90 birds at one 30 km stretch of river 'in the northeast'), apparently at fast-flowing rivers with gravel bars and islets, rivers in a relatively natural state and away from direct exposure to human habitation. Odd birds could nevertheless turn out in less attractive water bodies. In the following speculative section, I have compiled some locational information from the Internet and other sources, and my field results in December 2014.

A number of visiting tour groups have paid to be taken to the 'NE River', the above-mentioned particularly good wintering area for the species, or a variable collection of sites named as such, apparently at the middle and/or upper reaches of Han River within the borders of the northeastern province of Gangwon. Others visit South Korea and manage or fail to see the species by themselves. Its winter range potentially covers most of the nation, but is limited by river degradation and the advancing expansion of human settlements. Weather probably also forces **Scaly-sided Mergansers** to move around in the middle of winter. During my visit, practically all rivers on high mountains and many others lower down were either completely or partly frozen.

There clearly is a need for collective effort to create a better idea of the merganser's distribution, for visiting birdwatchers. I am personally unable to see a significant risk of disturbance in this case, for a species which inhabits densely populated regions of China and the Koreas, and which the guided groups frequently photograph, as witnessed by Internet materials. On the contrary, a few extra foreign visitors to their wintering grounds and their scope observations are likely to have no effect, or potentially even a positive effect, on the conservation of the species. The local nature photographers must already know where the birds are.

DAEJEON

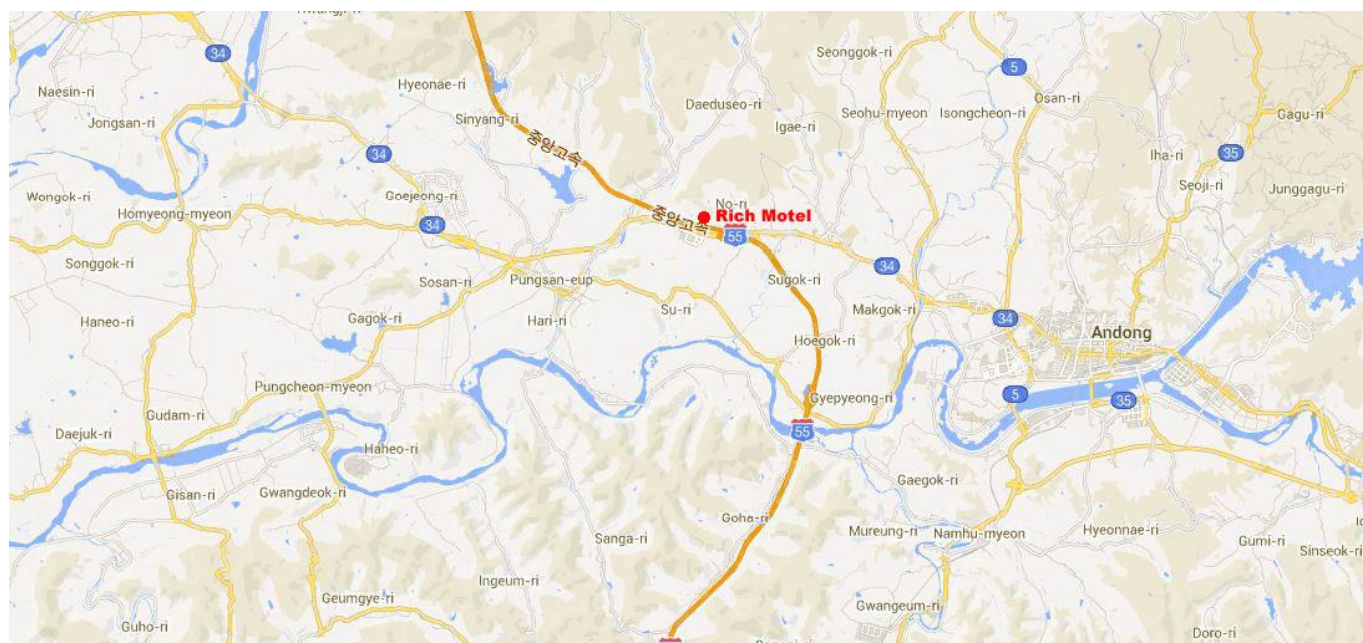
Many of the limited entries in the Internet are like the one on Daejeon. At some point in time, wintering **Scaly-sided Mergansers** have been recorded north of the city, around the barrage and perhaps in the Geum River itself. The location is a bit awkward for a circular tour of South Korea and I therefore did not go there.



Map 14. Geum River and reservoir barrage, north of Daejeon.

ANDONG Morning overcast, -15 C, 10 cm of snow.

Having already seen the mergansers at Naju-si, and keen to proceed north to Wonju and Heongseong, I did not wait for a sunrise at Andong (my original plan) to check the river there. This is one of the traditional wintering sites of **Scaly-sided Mergansers**. It has, however, become unreliable after some destructive canalization in the upper Nakdong River. In 2013, none were seen there. Nevertheless, one could score at this site.



Map 15. Potential merganser habitat west of Andong, with the location of Rich Motel.

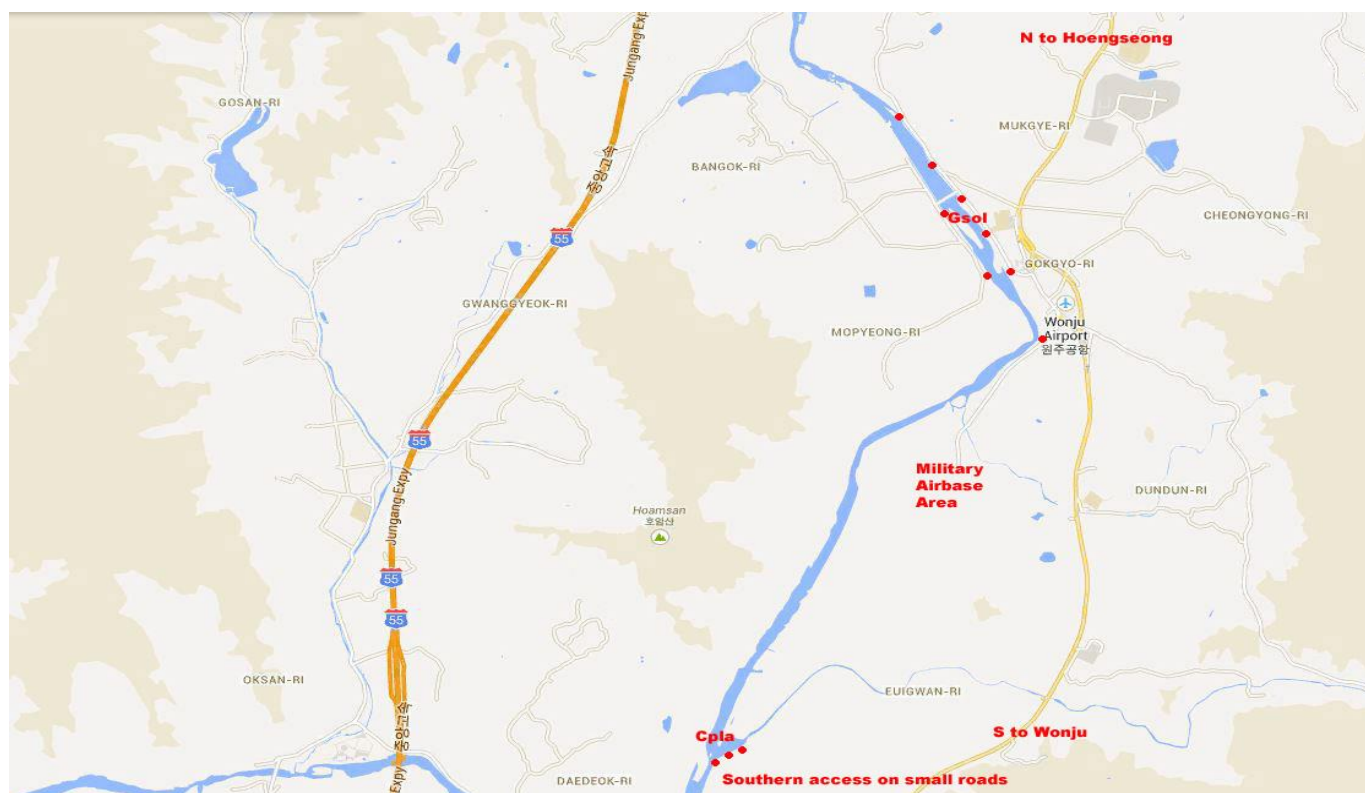
HOENGSEONG: Morning visit, 6.45 – 11.30. Calm, -17 C, 10 cm of snow, rivers mostly frozen, clear skies and stronger winds towards the noon.

One of the most promising sites for **Scaly-sided Mergansers**, as judged by Google Earth satellite image analysis, was located just south of Heongseong. Even though I failed to see any, I would guess that they are there in warmer conditions. On the 22nd of December, the day temperature was -17 C, and most of the river was frozen.

There are several features which should make the site attractive for the merganser. First, the river is in its natural state, with gravel bars, and fast-flowing enough to resist freezing, except in coldest conditions. Second, there is a long undisturbed stretch in-between the South Korean Air Force 8th Fighter Wing airbase ('Wonju Airport') in the east and a steep forested slope in the west. There is also plenty of fish in the river, as indicated by the presence of other fish-lovers there, such as **Grey Herons**.

I started my exploration of the site at the northern backdoor gates of the airbase and proceeded north, to a bridge across the river, and down left. The area south of the bridge looked very good and held a nice surprise. Despite the cold, a party of four **Common Snipes** was foraging there, together with two **Japanese Wagtails**, a **Green Sandpiper** and a **Common Kingfisher**! A **Siberian Accentor** was also calling in the riverside brush, by the open water. The snipes were initially mislabeled as **Solitary Snipes**, according to their habitat and behavior (freezing conditions did prevent proper on-site scrutiny), the true identity only being revealed by photographs, after my return from Korea. I had planned to return to Gwangneugn to look for the snipe again, because there

were no other sites for the species. Fortunately, I decided against it, based on this mistake, as the arboretum still had had none at the planned time of my second visit, as I later learned from others.



Map. 16. Excellent riverine habitat between Wonju and Hoengseong, with my observation stops. **Gsol** = **Solitary Snipe**, **Cpla** = **Long-billed Plover**. The southern farm road does not show in this map.

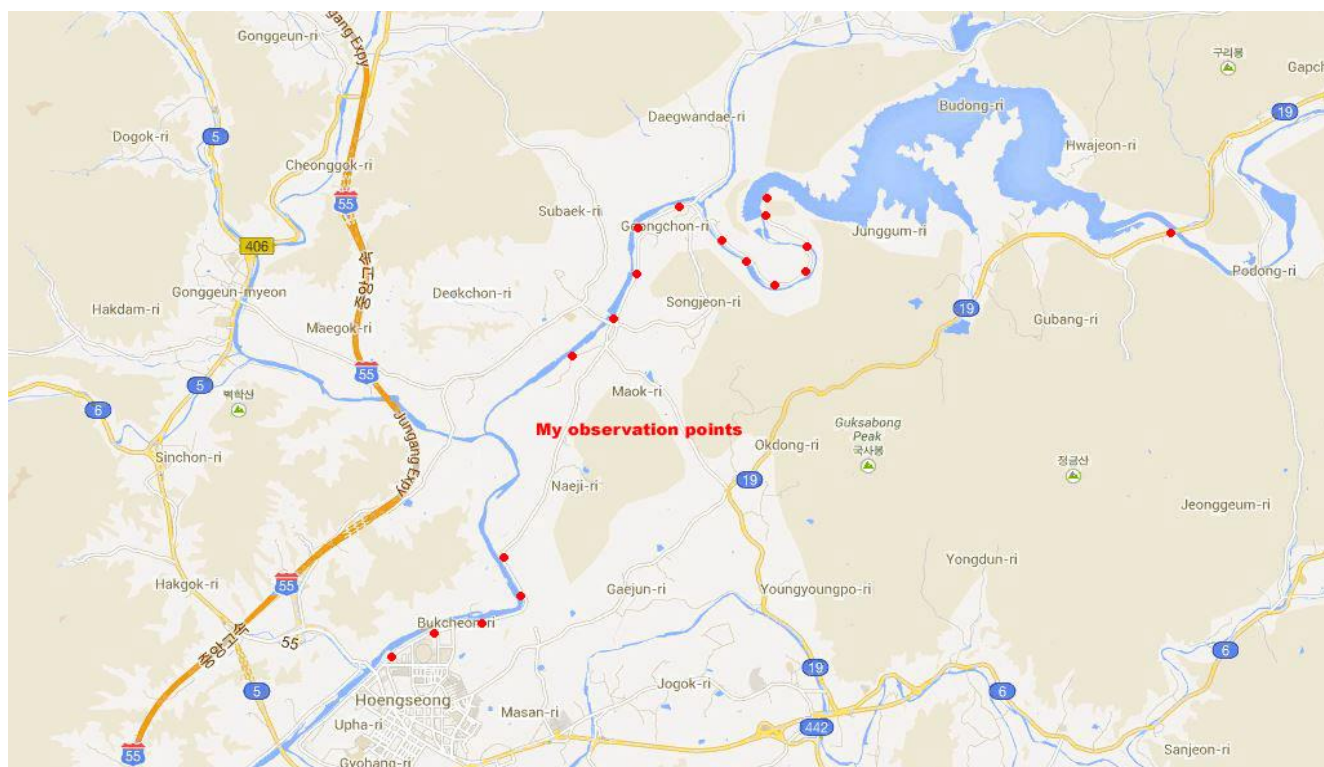
The closed military area prevented access to some of the river but my navigator showed that there was a farm road to the river in the south (at Dundun-ro), towards Wonju. The track was concrete and slippery in places. Going up and down, across a ridge, I momentarily lost control of the Kia, despite very careful driving. Fortunately, the slide ended just before the edge of the icy bridge-like track. Driving down to the river, I made stops to admire the lively mixed bunting parties (e.g. mostly **Elegant** but also 12 **Rustic Buntings** and four **Common Redpolls**, rare in Korea), so striking in the white environment. A short drive to the right took me to the airbase perimeter fence, along which an embankment trail to the left approached the river and a building (pumping station?) there. Greeting a man on the trail I walked in, to find a **Long-billed Plover** in an ice-free spot, but no mergansers.



Fig. 35. Four wintering **Common Snipes** and a **Japanese Wagtail** (foreground), foraging at -17 C (Hoengseong).



Fig. 36. The bridge north of 'Gsol' on Map 16. The river has not been completely developed, fortunately.

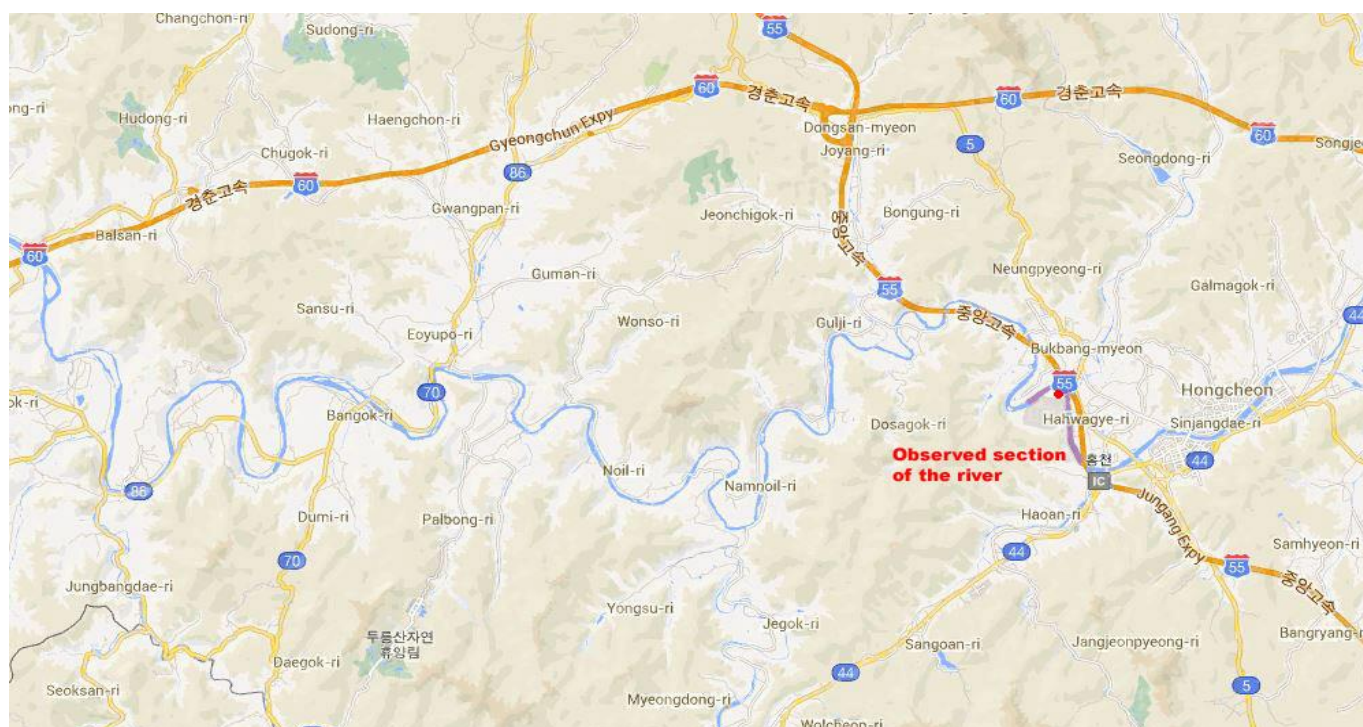


Map. 17. More observation sites north of Hoengseong, including a large reservoir.

Beyond the best spot, I drove to Hoengseong and followed the river thereafter, checking the open sections, all the way to a large dam (no ice) at Junggum-ri. Overall, good habitats, but no **Scaly-sided Mergansers**. Everything was, however, frozen east of Podong-ri. It was time to drive to the east coast. On the way, I stopped again at Jangpyeong-ri, checking some 10 km of rivers there, but the waters were frozen up there, too.

The other birds seen at Hoengseong included: **Little Grebes** (4), **Eastern Spotbilled Ducks** (60), **Mallards** (2), **Common Goldeneyes** (14), **Goosanders** (6), a **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**, **Carriion Crows** (2), another **Japanese Wagtail** and a **Brown Dipper**, in addition to the most widespread species. An **Amur Leopard Cat** and a **Siberian Weasel** were hunting at the river, in the -17 C conditions.

HONGCHEON: Short afternoon visit 16.30-17.30. Calm, -8 C, overcast sky, river mostly frozen, 5 cm of snow.



Map 18. Good section of river west of Hongcheon, and the section checked on the 23rd of December.

Two days later, on my way back towards Seoul, I also checked a short section of a river immediately west of Hongcheon. Before that, some 30 km of rivers between Yongso-ri and Hwachon-myeon (Road 56 onwards at Yangyang) had been discovered to be more or less completely frozen. Along the route, two **Peregrine Falcons**, a **Grey-headed Woodpecker**, eight **Azure-winged Magpies** and four **Rustic Buntings** had been spotted. At the highest point, at 1.013 m above sea-level, the icy road had required some very slow driving (missed the studs there!).

The Hongcheon site and the river between Highway 55 and Highway 60 has been known to hold **Scaly-sided Mergansers** on a regular basis. Unfortunately, sun was setting and I could not do more in the limited time.

The habitat looked right but the road arrangements, also confusing for my navigator, were a bit complicated. One crossed the river towards some sort of industrial establishment with grey walls, turned right to pass a narrow riverside track in-between frequent trucks, and parked in a left hand curve by the river, soon after a swastika sign indicating a temple. From thereon, it was easy to walk a less used track to a bend in the river (200 m), by an

abandoned military camp, probably dating back to the days of the 1950's Korean War. The most noteworthy birds were five **Ring-necked Pheasants** and a **Japanese Wagtail**.



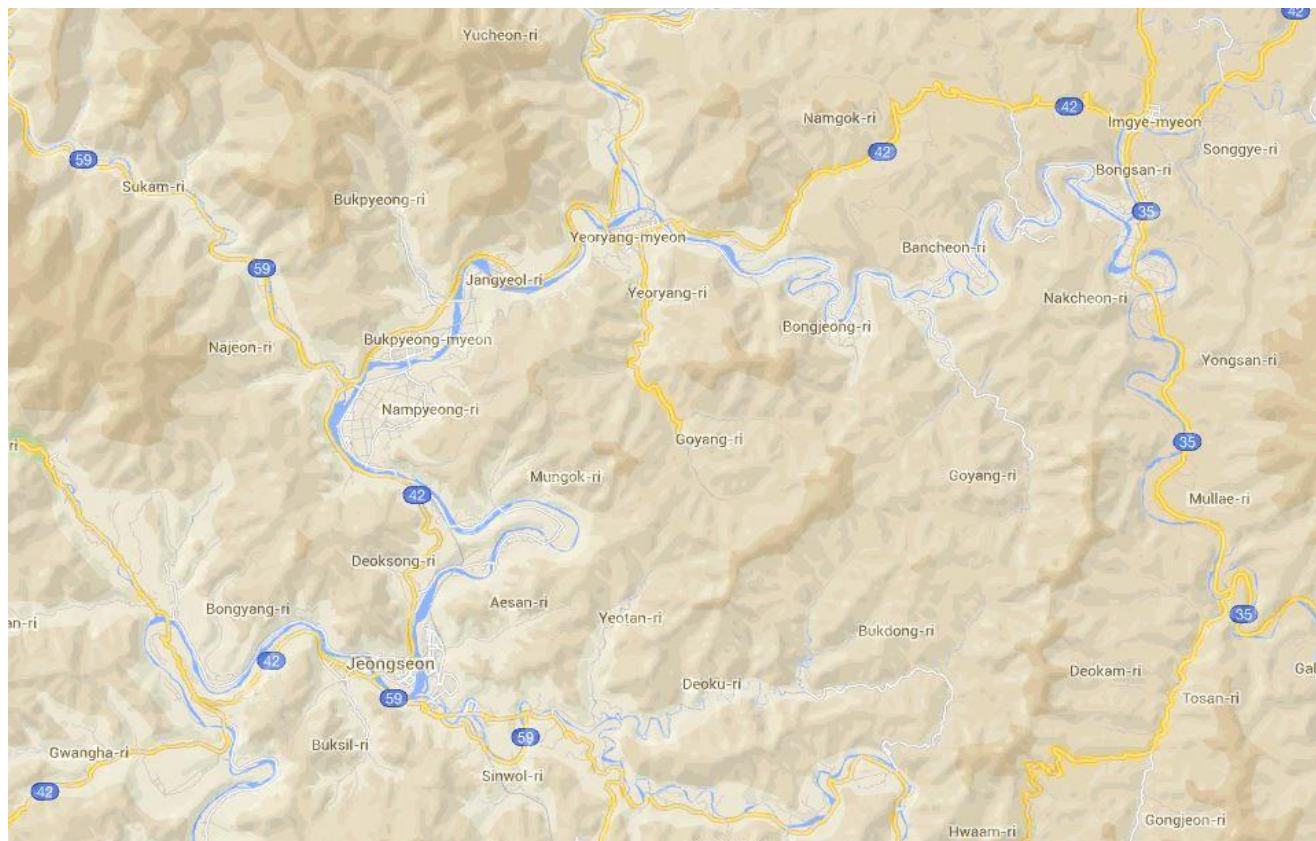
Fig. 37. When this sign is seen across the river and to the right, one is close to the start of a walking track.

JEONGSEON

In milder conditions, there are many mountain rivers which might merit checking out, time permitting. Among them, the rivers around Jeongseon look promising in Google Earth satellite images (perhaps too populated?). As Birds Korea points out, the mergansers are, however, often absent from sites which appear ideal for them. They are too few to occupy all the suitable rivers.

I did not see more **Scaly-sided Mergansers** after Naju-si. My advice is: reserve a few days for the species if you are on your own. One or two days might be risky, but in four days one is able to survey a lot of rivers. For a lifer, only a single bird is needed. Even better, one may locate the main wintering group. Overall, the number of non-developed tributaries of Han River in Gangwon is limited, after a governmental campaign to 'revitalize' the rivers to park-like leisure areas and other biodiversity-hostile environments – the 'green growth' Four Major Rivers Project. Some Google Earth satellite image analysis may help in the search.

All in all, visiting China for the species, or getting lucky in Japan, are not the only options. It is also a pleasure to discover the target after some searching, instead of being taken to the bird by somebody, and there are many other birds to be seen while doing so. I myself scored at the first site, but nevertheless kept on looking more to satisfy my curiosity, and to help others in the future, thereby discovering the only **Solitary Snipes** and (**Common Redpolls**) of the trip. Hoengseong merits a visit for other birds, too.



Map 19. The mountain rivers of Jeongseon, probably open in mild winters.

YANGYANG: First, afternoon trip 13.15-17.00; second, morning visit 13.45-14.45. Clear and sunny, but with a disturbingly strong wind, +3 C, and no snow on the ground.

At first sight, the southern side of Namdae River in Yangyang was crowded by habitation and gardens. There was, however, a good riverside track on the right, towards the coast. Turn right just before the Highway 7 bridge, follow your print and turn left to the gravel-surfaced 'nature drive'. It is possible to drive all the way to the long bridge at the mouth of the river (in the end, through gardens and habitation). My focus was on riverside scrub, as the river itself was almost completely frozen. In there, I finally scored with **Pallas's Rosefinches** (3; 23rd Dec), which were together with the only **Long-tailed Rosefinches** (6) of the trip. They occupied a scrubby depression in an open forest dominated by pines. At the river, few **Eastern Spotbilled Ducks** (6) and **Goosanders** (4) were seen.

I also checked a few small roads south of Suyeo-ri in that direction, without much result. On the inland side, the same four-way Highway 7 intersection (go west on Road 59) took me to relatively uninteresting habitats, down to the fourth Namdae bridge (as counted from the river mouth). **Cinereous Vultures** (up to 16) and **White-tailed Sea Eagles** (1 adult, 1 exceptionally pale juvenile) did, however, have their favorite scavenging spot there. In addition, there were **Whooper Swans** (10), **Mallards** (20), **Smews** (6) and three **Great Egrets**.

Driving south under the new toll highway (high up on pylons) not yet on maps, north of Yongcheon-ri, the villages finally had good habitat for the main target species, **Chinese Grey Shrike**. There were several embankment roads on both sides of the road, to be explored in peace. Unfortunately, two visits failed to produce a single shrike. The species appears to be really scarce. Other birds seen in this area included **Great Egrets** (5), a **Northern Goshawk**, a **Buff-bellied/Siberian Pipit**, a **Marsh Tit** and **Rustic Buntings** (6), in addition to the more common species. Driving north across the Highway 7 bridge, there were other good fields north of Songam-ri and beyond, towards Sokcho, with a few birds (e.g. many **Eurasian Skylarks**) but no shrikes.

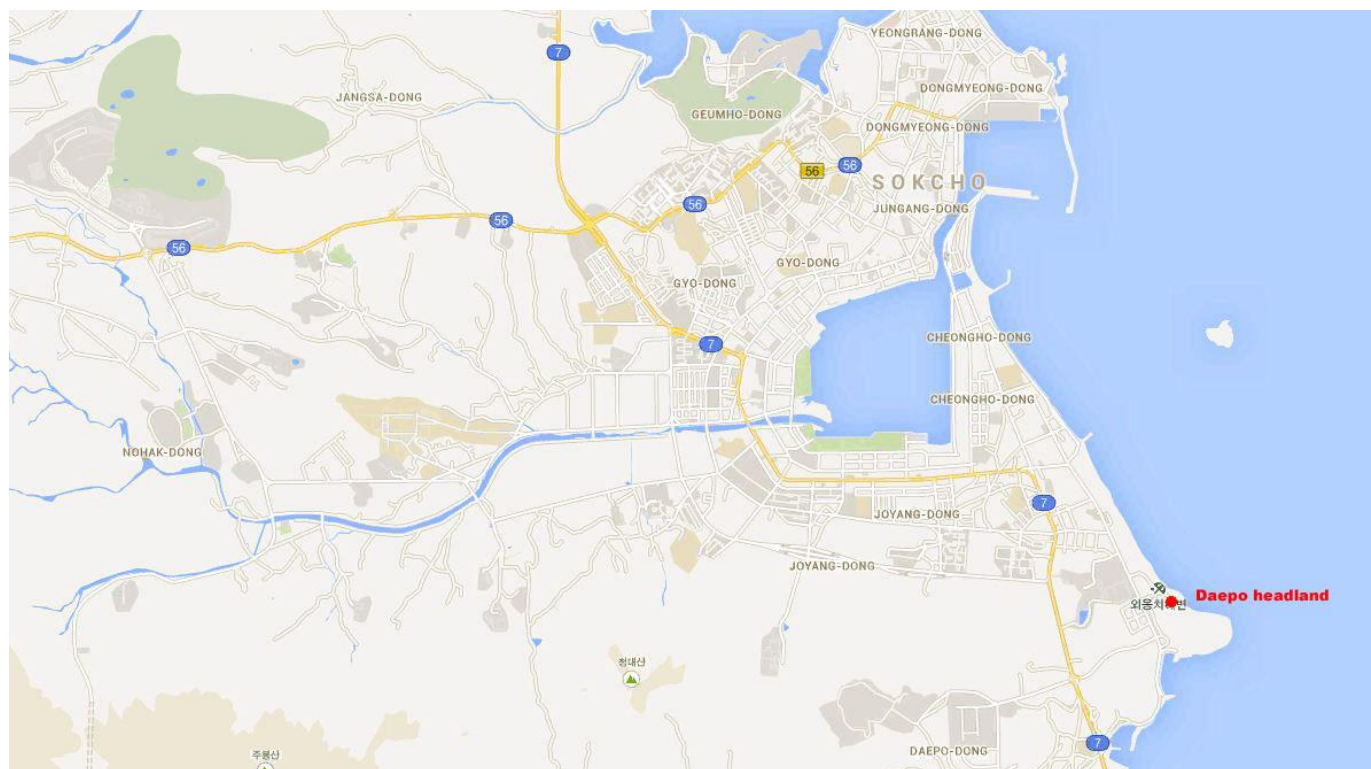


Map 20. Map of the Yangyang riverine sites. Amon = several **Cinereous Vulture**, Cpal = **Pallas's Rosefinch**, Usib = **Long-tailed Rosefinch**.



Fig. 38. The Namdae River was mostly frozen; a view towards the mouth, with the long seaside bridge.

DAEPO: Two short visits in connection with Geojin-ri and Yangyang. Clear and sunny weather, relatively light wind, +3 C, no snow.



Map 21. The location of Daepo Beach and headland, south of Sokcho.

On the first visit, I simply had a look at the sea, hoping to see some proper seabirds. Instead, a party of 200 wintering **Great Crested Grebes** was discovered, in addition to gulls, such as two adult **Glaucous Gulls** (a pair), **Slaty-backed Gulls** (20) and thousands of **Common Gulls**. On the second visit, an attempt to drive up to the headland was made – I had seen a car going up there in the previous afternoon. This was a mistake, as the place was gated and there was very limited space to turn around on the steep slope. I made it, and later focused on the birds of the bush and gardens. **Asian Rosy Finches** and **Pallas's Rosefinches** have, after all, been seen there in winter. I was, however, not as lucky as some others had been years ago.

GEOJIN-RI: Morning visit, 6.50-12.30. Clear and sunny day, light wind, +3 C, no snow.

At Geojin-ri, I was faced with a dilemma: I was at a prime sea-watching site but at the time, I still had not seen any **Pallas's Rosefinches** (saw them in the afternoon in Yangyang) and was already running out of stake-outs. As a result, 80% of the morning was spent staring at the forest edge, my back towards the sea. In the end, I also drove up to the headland, which was dotted by military installations. There is a tarmac track all the way up (Map 22, Fig. 39), with a view to the Evil Empire, North Korea, in the north. In the end, a walking trail across the hill starts by a small parking area. I did walk around the upper roads, in addition to checking any passerine activity lower down. Quite a few (mostly common) birds came out early in the morning, to enjoy the warmth of the morning sun. A rather dark (Korean) **Red Squirrel** was interesting to observe.

The presence of the military was considerable in Yangyang and further north, with frequent encounters with soldiers, military vehicles and patrolling helicopters, not to mention fighter jets, which had been seen over most of the birding locations on the route.



Map 22. The headland at Geojin-ri, a great spot for seabird observations, and some forest birding. Mphi = **Red-bellied Rock Thrush**.

On the inland side, the best birds included a **Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker**, a pair of **White-backed Woodpeckers**, eight **Coal Tits**, 10 **Marsh Tits** and two **Siberian Accentors**.

At sea, the diver movements were impressive, almost like at home. At least 700 **Red-throated Divers** moved first south and then north opposite the headland. There were also a few **Black-throated** and almost one hundred **Pacific Divers**; two species which relative occurrence in the Sea of Japan apparently remains somewhat unclear.

Other birds included **Pelagic Cormorants** (2), **Great Crested Grebes** (30), **Harlequin Ducks** (4), *stejgeneri* **White-winged Scoters** (160), **Black Scoters** (2) and **Smews** (10). The only alcids were a party of six **Guillemots**, supposedly rare in Korea. A variety of gulls included **Band-tailed** (40) and **Glaucous Gulls** (a pair), **Vega Gull** being the most numerous there. A subadult **Steller's Sea Eagle** followed the coast to south. There are not many **Steller's Sea Eagles** wintering in South Korea and I was happy to see a total of two, particularly because the Seosan Lakes bird was an adult one!

The best bird probably was a male **Red-bellied Rock Thrush** (*philippensis*), which inhabited a small islet in front of the headland. The species is apparently rare in winter in South Korea. On the other hand, how many birders visit rocky islands there during the winter months? There clearly is plenty to discover in regard to the seasonal distribution of birds in the Korean Peninsula, North Korea in particular, but also in South Korea. That is why we have a surprising diversity of distribution maps in the recent bird books. Some have a species wintering in most of South Korea, whereas others exclude the same species completely... Birds Korea has done great work but would benefit from more visitors in the peninsula.

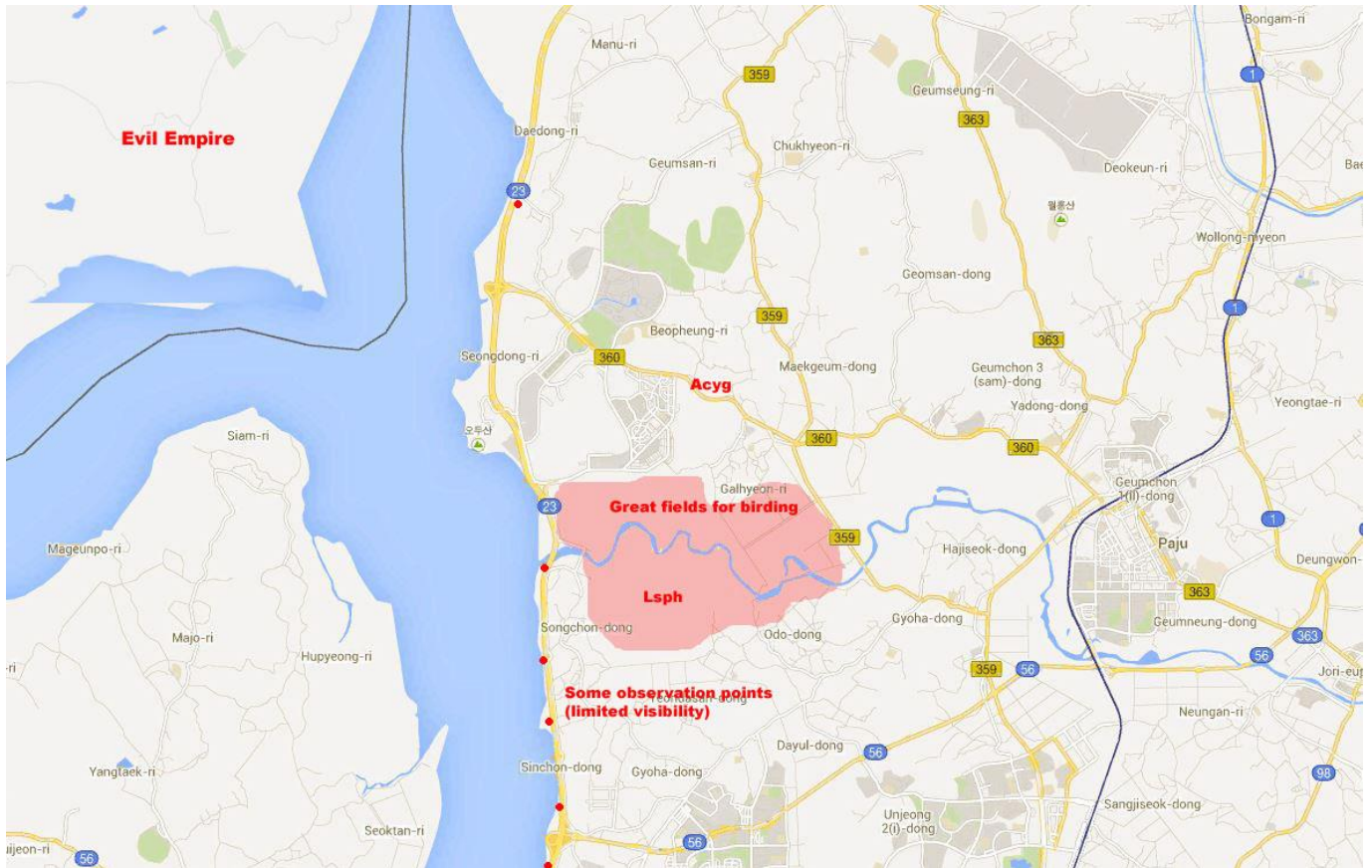


Fig. 39. An information sign gives an idea of the roads and tracks at Geojin-ri, but the terrain looks relatively flat. In reality, it was nothing but (see the following picture).



Fig. 40. In preparation to deter North Korean invasion, and defend the ‘free world’, the seaside road at Geojin-ri was heavily fenced and patrolled by the (friendly) military. There are, however, spots where rest areas provided higher vantage points for comfortable scoping.

HAN-IMJIN & GALHYEON-RI: Morning visit, 7.10-10.30. Light wind, clear sky, sunshine with +2 C to +4 C, no snow.



Map. 23. The Han-Imjin confluence and the location of extensive fields south of Galhyeon-ri. Acyg = **Swan Geese**, Lsph = **Chinese Grey Shrike**.

Birding the confluence of Han and Imjin Rivers, by the North Korean border, was a challenge indeed. The river has been fenced with continuous military installations all the way to Seoul, and there were very few spots with parking space and view to the river. I tried the tall hill at Seongdong-ri, but the access was closed by the military. I also followed some small roads further north, but they ended at the highway. Only in the south, observations could be made, mostly from the car and with illegal parking. The river had a party of 500 **Goosanders**, few **Common Goldeneyes**, an adult **White-tailed Sea Eagle** floating on a small piece of ice and two **Mongolian Gulls**. In conclusion, not much was seen, because of the very restricted views.

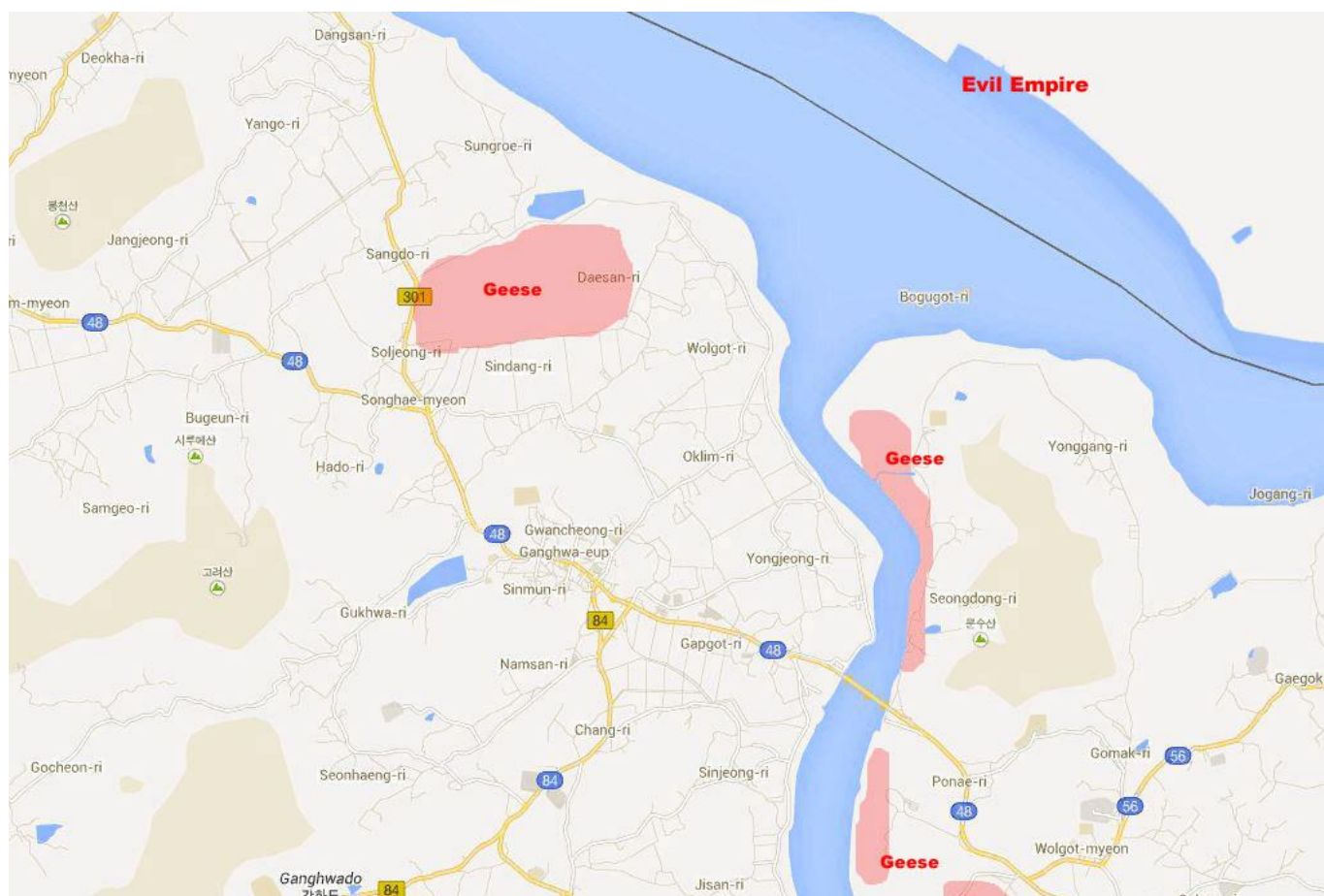
At two sites, there were some geese (160 **Tundra Bean Geese**, 800 **White-fronted Geese**) grazing on riverside meadows, but there were no **Swan Geese**, my second last target species. I only scored on the road (360) to Galhyeon-ri, when a pair finally flew east by the road, in morning mist. A relief but also a bit disappointing lifer, on a trip with a total of 41.000 geese! I had, after all, hoped to photograph some foraging on a field.

Following the geese, which all seemed to fly east from the river, I discovered the large and tranquil fields of Galhyeon-ri, around a small river which flows to the mighty Han. In there, I got lucky again, by finally spotting a **Chinese Grey Shrike**, after a week of searching for it! The record concluded my target species list, **Oriental Stork** being extremely unlikely in the northwest, to say the very least. The other notable birds at the Galhyeon-ri fields included **Tundra Bean Geese** (1.000), **White-fronted Geese** (1.200), a **Chinese Penduline Tit** and **Meadow Buntings** (30), in addition to the most common species.

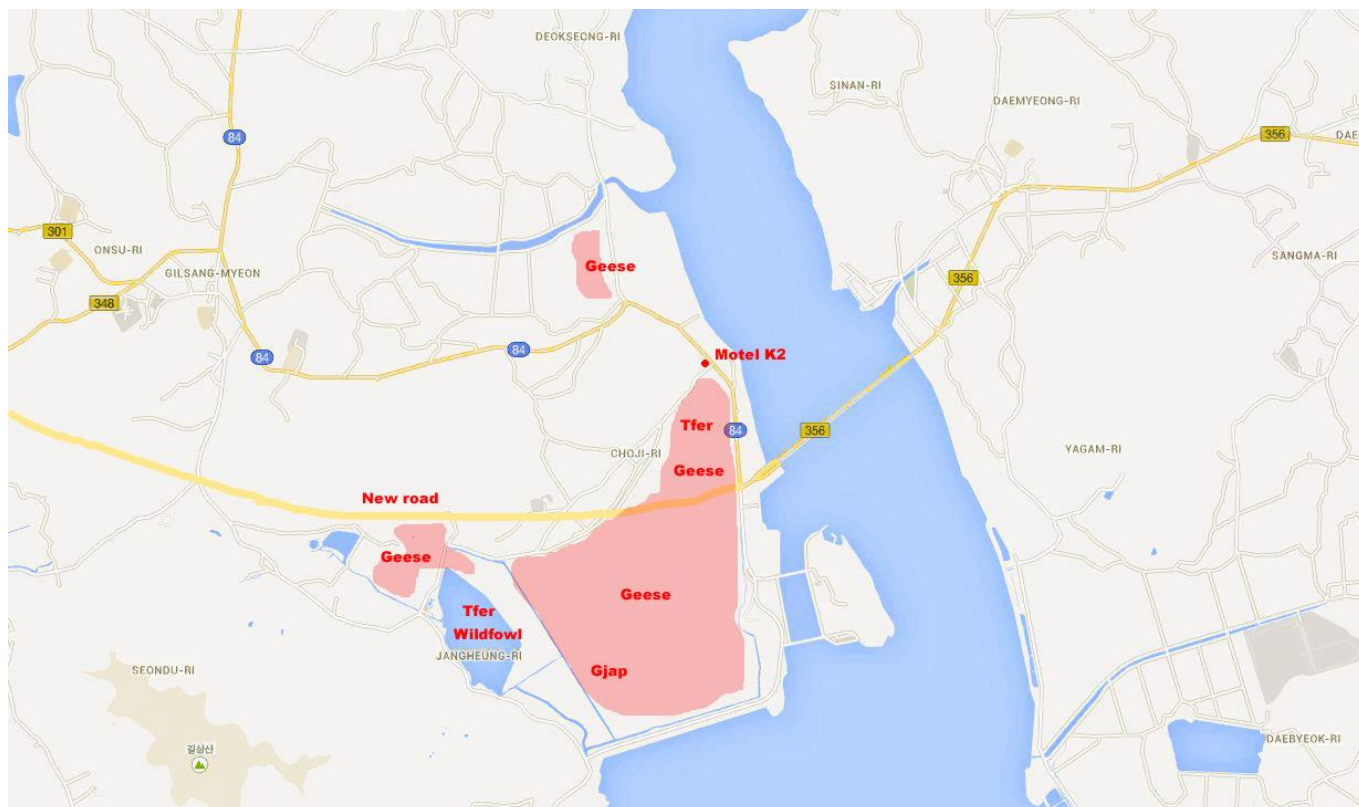


Fig. 41. Finally, my last missing (realistically available) target species, early in the morning at Galhyeon-ri! The rising sun gives warm tones to a shrike whose breast was actually cold grey. In addition to wing pattern, the long graduated tail with white rectrices and the bill are visible also from this angle. So many empty fields before scoring, but the better it felt to finally be able to admire a **Chinese Grey Shrike**!

GANGHWA ISLAND: First, afternoon visit 11.00 -17.00; second, short morning trip 7.00-8.00. Once again, calm and sunny weather on both days, +4 C, and a smattering of snow on ground.



Map 24. The northeastern corner of Ganghwa Island, with the location of foraging geese flocks. The area is next to North Korea and therefore well guarded by the South Korean Army. This did not, however, hinder enjoyment of birdlife and rural scenery in this attractive area.



Map 25. The southeastern corner of Ganghwa Island, another area with many birds. Tfer = **Ruddy Shelduck**, Gjap = **Red-crowned Crane**.

I had saved Ganghwa Island for the last day because of its potential for several interesting species (I still hoped to photograph **Swan Geese**) and because its close proximity to the Incheon International Airport. On the Christmas Day morning, there would not be much traffic but I had to be sure to make it to the gate on time, to catch my Korean Air flight back to Fukuoka, for another week of birding in Kyushu.

The first area of investigation was the northern part of the channel which separates the island from the mainland, at Wolgot-myeon. Leaving the Road 48 (several small supermarkets conveniently by the road) just before the bridge, I drove right on a village road (Seondong-ri), and later made the short distance to a riverside military patrol track, at a base of a barrier fence designed to slow the North Koreans. There were no keep out signs and I could follow the concrete track for a kilometer, before returning to the village road.

Afterwards, I drove back to the Road 48 junction, driving south under it, and following the river again until the end of the road. On return journey, I veered right across the fields, entering Wolgot-myeon from the south, and almost had the previously described accident at the main 48-56 intersection.

My next project was to proceed north on the other side of the channel. I had to, however, leave the road before Wolgot-ri, because of a military base area. The soldiers at the road block, even though polite, did not consider birding an essential activity in the restricted zone. I did, however, approach the area again at Sangdo-ri, driving east, all the way to a (frozen) reservoir by the river. There were extensive fields in the south of the rural road, with geese and other birds. Two **Siberian Roe Deer** and one **Siberian Weasel** were also spotted.

A drive around the island followed, with a short visit to the seashore at the fishing village of Inhwa-ro. There were good fields but not so many birds, until I reached the southeastern corner of the island, by the long Road 356 bridge. There is a new road there, not visible on Google Earth maps, and good birding at the fields around it. My

last accommodation, Motel K2 was also right there, conveniently close to the birds. In addition to geese, the fields had many **Ruddy Shelducks**, a total of 800 and a beautiful sight in the afternoon sun. Two more **Siberian Roe Deer** and another **Siberian Weasel** were also encountered at the SE fields.

In the last morning, I spent an hour at the same fields, before driving to Incheon, and saw much the same birds as on the previous day. The best new record was a pair of adult **Red-crowned Cranes**, a good omen for the trip to Kyushu. The cranes flew in from south, having obviously spent the night on some small island there. They were, however, not the last addition to my South Korea list. Closer to Incheon, there was a roadside **Eastern Blackbird**, a recent colonist in the region. As expected, the highways were almost empty and the ride to the airport was rather pleasant, after a successful trip, in a bright sunny morning.

The combined geese totals for the northeast and southeast Ganghwa were: **Taiga Bean Geese** (4), **Tundra Bean Geese** (435) and **White-fronted Geese** (8.500). Overall, this was the geese ratio for the whole trip, a clear dominance of **White-fronted Geese**. For the two common species of ducks, the totals were 7.000 for **Eastern Spotbilled Ducks** and 2.000 for **Mallards**. Three **Great Egrets** were seen on the way, in addition to two **Merlins**, six **Mongolian Gulls**, 40 **Meadow Buntings** and 25 **Rustic Buntings**, not to mention the common species listed in the beginning of the report. There were, as an example, 25 **Eastern Buzzards** hunting over the fields of Ganghwa Island.



Fig. 42. A typical winter scene on Ganghwa Island: *serrirostris* **Taiga Bean Geese**, two **Eastern Spotbilled Ducks**, an **(Oriental) Magpie** (see Wikipedia for taxonomy) and a domestic cat observing the ever so interesting but hopelessly large game.

Incidentally, University of Oulu genetic analysis has just revealed that two *serrirostris* **Tundra Bean Geese** were recently shot in Finland, during the geese hunting season! Two is a lot, in a sample of 150 *fabalis* **Taiga** and *rossicus* **Tundra Bean Geese**, and opens a number of new questions.

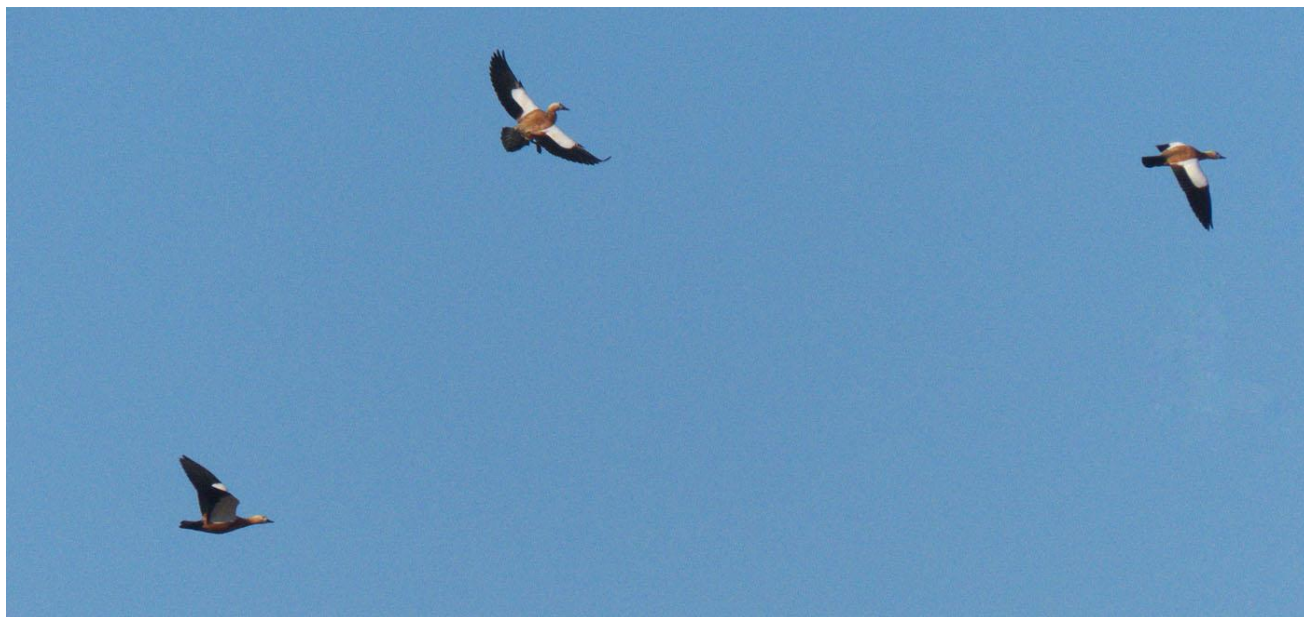


Fig. 43. Eight hundred **Ruddy Shelducks** adorned the fields next to Motel K2.

CONCLUSION

Producing this report, with its inadequacies and language errors, has required many hours of work. I do, however, regret it was not possible to invest more time. In the end, it was more important to deliver the report soon enough than to keep on polishing it, to return a favor to those who have done their part of the community effort which enables us to travel across the globe with a degree of confidence. Already now, people have asked advice by email, and I have tried to answer their questions. The report has had higher than an average number of maps and photos to give a better idea of birding conditions in the field. A report such as this, especially the maps, would have helped me a lot after arriving in South Korea, if available. I therefore trust that others will find it helpful, too.



Fig. 44. Millions of squid were prepared for consumption at Guryongpo Peninsula, much like people dry fish in Norway. Somehow I, as a human being, felt guilty when confronted by all these empty eyes.