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Wed, May 15, 2024 | 20:43

Korea's regents of the sky: Part 2

Posted : 2024-04-07 14:45
Updated : 2024-04-07 17:03



Master falconer Park Yong-soon handles a golden eagle in this February 2015 photo. Robert Neff Collection

By Robert Neff

In the early 1920s, an American gold miner working at Oriental Consolidated Mining Company in northern Korea wrote:

“The Koreans are not allowed any firearms, so do not do much hunting except a little with hawks. They catch hawks and starve them and then liberate them to catch pheasants and other birds. When the hawk catches the bird the hunter steps in and takes the bird away from the hawk. It sounds odd but you would be surprised how many they catch.”

The idea of falconry may have seemed strange to this young American, but he, like his peers, was fairly impressed — especially considering (judging by their letters home) their own bird hunts with guns were often unsuccessful. His assumption that Koreans hunted with hawks was because they were banned from owning guns wasn't quite true. Korea has a long and colorful history of hawking.

In the mid-1890s, Isabella Bird Bishop, an English travel writer, described pheasants as being “literally without number and are very tame.” While they may have seemed tame to her, they were not so tame that one could easily walk up and snatch them. Hawks and falcons were needed for the task — and they did very well.

In the 1930s, one Korean hunter boasted to Sten Bergman, a Swedish zoologist, that in one season, with just one hawk, he managed to bag 300 pheasants. Perhaps not as impressive as the hunter who claimed to Bishop that “he sometimes got between twenty and thirty pheasants a day but had to walk or run 100 li [approx. 55km] to do it.”

Bishop pointed out that obtaining and training falcons



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was no easy matter.

“To obtain them three small birds are placed in a cylinder of loosely woven bamboo, mounted horizontally on a pole. On the peregrine alighting on this, a man who has been concealed throws a net over the whole. The bird is kept in a tight sleeve for three days. Then he is daily liberated in a room, and trained to follow a piece of meat pulled over the floor by a string. At the end of a week he is taken out on his master’s wrist, and slipped when game is seen. He is not trained to return. The master rushes upon him and secures him before he has time to devour the bird.”



Master falconer Park Yong-soon holds up one of his trained birds of prey in this February 2015 photo. Robert Neff Collection

It was extremely important to get the falcon before it ate too much. Once full, the falcon would no longer hunt.



The front gate of the Korea Hawking School in Daejeon / Robert Neff Collection

Korea's regents of the sky: Part 1

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Once trained, these birds were very expensive and in the 1890s brought as much as \$9 a bird — a princely sum considering servants could be hired for a couple of dollars each month.

Of course, such valuable and noble birds attracted less than honorable attention. The Korean idiom “shi ch’i mi tte da” meaning “to feign ignorance” is said to have its origin in the theft of falcons. The falcons were marked with tags (shi ch’i mi) on their tail which indicated their owners but occasionally these tags were removed by unscrupulous people who then claimed the falcon as their own.

At least one American raised hawks for a very short time in the early 1900s. William Franklin Sands, an adviser to the Korean government, wrote:

“A very noble but exceedingly expensive sport was hawking. I kept hawks for a while, for the experience and as an attraction to the young courtiers, but it was too troublesome to go on with.”

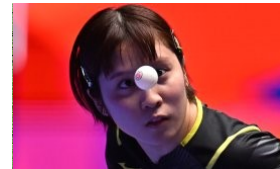
Unlike many of the early Westerners in Korea, Sands was fairly adventurous and recorded many of his encounters:

“Two expert falconers, heavily paid, and a dog man to follow with the retriever, were necessary for each bird. The hawk was [...] perched on a heavy gauntlet and hooded, with a small silver bell on his collar to locate him after flight. He is not trained to return to the hawker’s wrist, but to the dog. The dog is of no particular breed, and is rarely broken to retrieve. His duty is to find the fallen game and guard it until it is picked up. The hawk is trained to go and perch on his back until the hunters come up with him, and they follow on foot. The broken hill country is not suited to hawking from horseback. It is a delightful sport. Pheasants are the easiest game. They are plentiful and fly straight away for the far side of the narrow valleys,

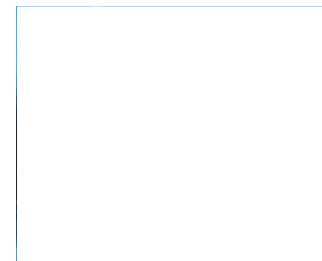


A northern goshawk perches on the arm of Choi Dong-gyu, the son of a hawk handler, in this February 2015 photo. Note the red shi ch’i mi (identification tag) near the tail. Robert Neff

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the hawk a little above until he can strike at the neck or head, and he rarely strikes until just before the pheasant reaches safety on the other side. The stout, elderly noble waits in full sight of the chase and joins it at his leisure while younger blood runs at top speed with the hawkers and miscellaneous beaters and follows behind the two birds.”

Sands went on to explain that the hawk was kept fierce by starving and teasing it. It was only fed enough to keep its strength but never enough to satisfy it. It was also deprived of sleep by a man who would tease it to ensure that it was constantly alert.

It is little wonder that the birds often suffered from innumerable ailments and, according to Sands, “if one pursues this noble game, it is etiquette to believe absolutely and without comment all that the hawk tells you” in regards to the bird’s health “and to pay him what he asks for rare medicines and remedies, equally without comment.”

Hawking is no longer as popular as it once was, but it still exists. One of my fondest memories was a visit I made to the [Korea Hawking School](#), a school of falconry in Daejeon, in 2015. Master falconer Park Yong-soon, who has been learning falconry from when he was a boy, demonstrated his craft to a large crowd of spectators and journalists.

With the passage of time, many things are lost, but hopefully, through the efforts of Park and his school, falconry will live on in a colorful display of the past when the great raptors ruled the sky.

Robert Neff has authored and co-authored several books, including [Letters from Joseon, Korea Through Western Eyes](#) and [Brief Encounters](#).

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CEO & Publisher: Oh Young-jin
Digital News Email: webmaster@koreatimes.co.kr
Tel: 02-724-2114
Online newspaper registration No: 서울,아52844
Date of registration: 2020.02.05
Masthead: The Korea Times
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