

South Korea Tour Report

21-31st January 2017

Tour Highlights

Because of rarity, excellent views or simply a group favourite; E = Endangered Species

- Hazel Grouse
- Swan Goose
- Lesser White-fronted Goose
- Baikal Teal
- Harlequin Duck
- Stejneger's Scoter
- Scaly-sided Merganser (E)
- Oriental Stork (E)
- Steller's Sea Eagle
- Cinereous Vulture
- Rough-legged Buzzard
- White-naped Crane
- Red-crowned Crane (E)
- Hooded Crane
- Sandhill Crane
- Solitary Snipe
- Saunders Gull
- Relict Gull
- Glaucous-winged Gull
- Brunnich's Guillemot
- Spectacled Guillemot
- Long-billed Murrelet
- Ancient Murrelet
- Rhinoceros Auklet
- Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker
- White-backed Woodpecker
- Bull-headed Shrike
- Chinese Grey Shrike
- Varied Tit
- Yellow-bellied Tit
- Chinese Penduline Tit
- Vinous-throated Parrotbill
- White-cheeked Starling
- Pale Thrush
- Dusky Thrush
- Naumann's Thrush
- Siberian Accentor
- Japanese Wagtail
- Chinese Grosbeak
- Long-tailed Rosefinch
- Pallas's Rosefinch
- Meadow Bunting
- Black-faced Bunting
- Pallas's Reed Bunting
- Asian Rosy Finch

The list of highlights above, seen on Zoothera Birding's second winter tour to South Korea, illustrates exactly why this country remains an exciting birding destination. Once again we found an extremely high proportion of our target species with most of them being seen more than once, allowing us to feel like we "knew" the birds rather than just a one off experience. Beginning near Seoul we began with woodland birding at the National Arboretum where the undoubted highlight was Solitary Snipe. Although cold the dawn flypast of Red-crowned and White-naped Cranes at Cheorwon was superb and from here we went south of Seoul to the forest at Namhansanseong for Hazel Grouse followed up with the Han River for Steller's Sea Eagle. From here we headed to the northeast coast and enjoyed birding along the harbours, headlands and beaches, as well as a boat trip, for Gulls, Alcids, Divers and Sea Ducks. We then moved along the south coast visiting the Nakdong Estuary, Junam Reservoir and Suncheon Bay all of which provided exceptional quality birding. Heading up the west coast we gorged our eyes on half a million Baikal Teal, got close to

Saunder's Gull, studied the features of Pallas's Reed Bunting before finishing the trip with more views of the superb Steller's Sea Eagle. For a wide variety of birds and a number of rare and range-restricted species, South Korea is a great country for a mid-winter birding trip.

Day 1; 21st January

Nial Moores and I met at Incheon airport, on the morning of 21st, so that we could meet the tour participants on their arrival from UK. We met all members of our party without incident and we were comfortably seated in our vehicle heading to our first birding site soon after. Upon reaching the National Arboretum a moderate covering of snow created a very beautiful winter atmosphere and we were to enjoy a very pleasant afternoon of birding in lovely surroundings getting familiar with some of the commoner woodland birds of South Korea as well as a few that were highly-anticipated. The first few birds we saw were a nice close-up of **Marsh Tit** and our first **Brown-cheeked Bulbuls** which were to see on a daily basis in all habitats. Checking the stream close to the car park turned up nothing but a bit further along, in exactly the same spot as in 2016, we found our main target, the cryptic but very handsome **Solitary Snipe**. The fact that there were two of them gave us a chuckle but we were treated to prolonged, walkaway, views of the first of our major targets of the trip.

As so often happens in birding, standing around admiring one bird led to more with the branches of the low trees above us suddenly full of a flock of birds including **Eastern Great Tit, Marsh Tit** and **Varied Tit**. This regional endemic is a real stunner and we were lucky enough to get a pair in at very close range which delighted the photographers among us. As we were enjoying these birds Nial alerted us to the call of **Yellow-bellied Tit** and a quick scan of the area from which the call came revealed a pair of these cute birds, a scarce and irruptive visitor to South Korea from Eastern China. For those of us from UK where **Hawfinch** is a hard bird to find it seemed strange to see so many of them here although **Magpie** felt much more mundane. A familiar sound lured us to take a walk around the arboretum and before long we were watching **Eurasian Nuthatches** quickly followed by a brief view of our first **Naumann's Thrush** and then another of the birds that many of the group were looking forward to; **Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker**. We watched two of these cute little woodpeckers, on a large tree, alongside the nuthatches with more **Varied Tits** to join the party.



Snow flurries began to make birding a little harder but further walking around the gardens revealed **Green Sandpiper**, some very photogenic **Brown-cheeked Bulbuls** feeding on red berries among the snow, a briefly seen **Dusky Thrush**, a **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, a pair of **Goldcrests** and a **White-backed Woodpecker** although we never saw the Black Woodpecker that was heard a few times.

With the weather closing in and the light failing we decided it was time to leave and drive to Cheorwon where we checked into a nice warm hotel and went out to sample some enjoyable Korean food and drink.

Day 2; 22nd January

Our first full day birding in Korea started before dawn so that we were in place at our vantage point on a small hillock that overlooks the plains bordering the Demilitarized zone between North and South Korea. This is one of the coldest parts of South Korea and it most certainly was one of the coldest days of the trip with the early morning temperature at -18C. However, the procession of cranes, flying past us over the next half an hour or so was truly spectacular with ever-increasingly large numbers of them passing by closer and closer until it felt like we could reach out and grab hold



of some of them. Here we enjoyed the best views imaginable of both **Red-crowned Crane** and **White-naped Crane**, both extremely elegant and beautiful birds, and it was interesting to observe that many of them held their legs inside their plumage for warmth until the last moment before landing. Eventually the fly-past was over but we were able to enjoy both species throughout the day as they few on spilt grain in farmland around the area. Taking a short

walk around the area which consisted of farmland, scrubby areas and reedy ditches we found our first flocks of **Rustic Bunting**, more **Hawfinches** and **Eastern Great Tits**, a **Wren**, lots of **Oriental Turtle Doves**, a couple of nice **Naumann's Thrushes**, a flock of **Long-tailed Tits** and some **Oriental Greenfinches** looking very nice in the bright early morning sunshine. Overhead we saw our first **Eastern Buzzard** and **Cinereous Vultures** but it was soon time to keep our appointment with Nial's contact who had arranged for us to enter the Citizen Controlled Zone, a restricted access area immediately adjacent to the DMZ. The soldiers were friendly and our laminated pass to be displayed in the windscreen depicted a large Red-crowned Crane! We spent the remainder of the morning driving around the fields in this area, stopping here and there to view the birds. There were plenty of **Rustic Buntings** and **Yellow-throated Buntings**, a flock of **Far Eastern (Japanese) Skylarks** that flew overhead and a wonderful **Chinese Grey Shrike** spotted sitting on some overhead wires which then treated some of us to amazing in-flight hovering action before settling on an exposed perch for everyone to enjoy. Of course there were plenty more **Red-crowned** and **White-naped Cranes** for us to enjoy as well as a **Merlin** and a small number of **White-fronted Geese**.

Venturing out for a walk around a scrubby field was a cold experience as a wind had got up to compliment the low temperatures but it proved worthwhile with the discovery of 3 **Long-tailed Rosefinches**, one of which was a lovely male. However, with these birds admired for some time we were ready to get back in the car to warm up and we drove down the road to an area where **Cinereous Vulture** is a regular. However, we were not prepared for such huge numbers with a group

of around 450 birds loafing around in fields and wheeling around overhead; quite an incredible experience to be so close to such vast birds. We watched in amusement as two South Korean soldiers went on patrol right across the area that many of the Vultures were loafing around on and were hassled by some of the birds that were extremely reluctant to leave their sunny spot. At least 4 **White-tailed Eagles** were sitting among the vultures and we were also able to scan the unfrozen part of a nearby lake to check out the wildfowl. Well, South Korea is a superb place for both variety and abundance of wildfowl and even at this less than prime spot we found our first **Baikal Teal**, **Falcated Duck**, **Northern Pintail**, **Common Pochard**, **Gadwall**, **Whooper Swans**, **Smew**, **Goosander** and at least 2 **Tundra (Bewick's) Swans**. This turned out to be a very good spot with a lot of variety of species and in addition to our raptors and wildfowl we were treated to excellent views of **Oriental Greenfinch**, **Brambling**, **Yellow-throated Bunting**, **Daurian Redstart** and yet more **Rustic Buntings**.

After a picnic lunch we went for another walk around some farmland, next to a river where we saw most of the wildfowl we had already seen, in flight after both **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** and **Northern Goshawk** made a raid upon them, this gave us nice flight views of **Baikal Teal** and while there were good numbers of **Vinous-throated Parrotbills** in the undergrowth the wind had whipped up and we retreated to the warmth of the vehicle. Retracing our path in the vehicle we came across a nice

Naumann's Thrush, basking in a sunny spot and then a female **Meadow Bunting** in front of the vehicle. We got out to get a better view, which some of us did, but there would be more chances for the rest of the group. Then followed a strange situation in which we found that somehow we had exited the CCZ without passing through a checkpoint and now needed to return into it in order to find our way back.



However, two young soldiers at this checkpoint would not allow us back in. The exchange was always friendly but our only option was then to re-find our "secret entrance" which then took us past our two military friends on the other side of their checkpoint; their faces were a picture as we drove past waving to them in their realization that somehow we had found a secret way through the world's most militarized border! (In fact that would be through the central DMZ rather than the buffer zone that we were in but let's not spoil a good story hey?)

As the day drew towards its end we drove to a riverside park close to Cheorwon town where we hoped to find **Eurasian Eagle Owl** and some of the group had not even got out of the car when we found it. We got great 'scope views of this huge owl as it began to call while there was still plenty of light. A strange raptor flew overhead which reminded us of a large Peregrine but on better views it turned out to be a **Northern Goshawk** of the *fujimayae* subspecies, certainly a confusing raptor and not at all like the Northern Goshawks that most of us are used to. With this fantastic end to a truly

wonderful day we headed back to our cosy restaurant for a well-earned hot dinner and a few glasses of Korean Soju.

Day 3: 23rd January

How were we going to follow on from the fantastic day we had just experienced? How about driving up into the beautiful snow-covered hill forest at Namhansanseong to look for a woodland speciality? This historic location was like some sort of Santa's Grotto Winter Wonderland with its pine trees and liberal covering of snow and at the car park we were greeted by **Eastern Great Tit**, **Magpie**, **Grey Wagtail** and a couple of splendid **Varied Tits**. However, the object of our visit was always going to be found in more secluded forest so we took a walk up some snowy slopes among the woodland. At first it was cold and shady with few birds but as the sun began to hit the area we were in things began to liven up with some cute, confiding **Marsh Tits**, a couple of **Eurasian Jays**, a pair of **Eurasian Nuthatches** and some lovely **Naumann's Thrushes** atop a tree basking in the early morning rays. With the sun waking everything up (including us) a fluttering of movement in some thorny growth in a tree revealed what we had come to see: **Hazel Grouse**. In fact as we watched we noticed a second bird enjoying the sunshine as the first bird moved slowly through the tree feeding, what a view! After enjoying this memorable bird for quite some time we decided to head off to another location in the hope of finding another very special species but along the way we came across both **Great Spotted Woodpecker** and **White-backed Woodpecker** as well as the already familiar **Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker**.



A drive of around 40 minutes found us at a very different type of habitat, the Han river at Paldang, actually not that far as the crow flies from central Seoul. The river had islets and large areas of iced water and along its banks there were patches of scrubby habitat and reeds, all with a backdrop of large city buildings and spectacular mountains. Although cold it was a lovely sunny day by now and wonderful visibility for birding. As we descended from where we had parked our car a **Siberian Accentor** was spotted sitting on top of a small tree and in the light we had it made a nice 'scope view. Shortly after a few of us briefly saw a small flock of **Pallas's Reed Buntings** but the view was unsatisfactory and half the group missed them entirely; "never mind, this is a fairly common bird", we thought, only to find that it would be one of those bogey birds only to be found right at the end of the tour. Scanning the islets nearby revealed **White-tailed Sea Eagle** and our only **Carion Crow** of the trip with plenty of wildfowl to go through; **Great Crested Grebe**, **Eastern Spot-billed Duck**, **Whooper Swan**, **Falcated Duck**, **Goosander**, **Smew**, **Goldeneye** and a small group of **Mandarin Duck**. But, further up the river, sitting on the ice was what we had come for – **Steller's Sea Eagle**, a magnificent adult. However, it was very distant and better views were definitely required of this key species so we walked quickly along the river promenade to get closer. In fact it was quite a walk and

as we marched along we saw **Oriental Turtle Dove**, **Vinous-throated Parrotbill**, **Common Kestrel**, **Eastern Buzzard**, **Common Kingfisher** and **Mongolian Gull** with a flyover **Rough-legged Buzzard** for some of us. Every few hundred metres we viewed the **Steller's Sea Eagle** again getting ever closer views until we were enjoying very nice 'scope views before the bird flew further down river. But, oh no! One of our group had lagged behind to study some of the commoner birds and missed the best views!!!! At the time this seemed like a nightmare but in hindsight it worked in our favour because after a quick lunch we drove along the other bank of the river to get better views, after all this was the one bird more than any other that had prompted people to make the journey to South Korea. We spent the remainder of the afternoon tracking down our Eagle and ended up with really great views of the bird sitting on the ice in the middle of the river along with lots more of the birds already seen. As we walked back in the afterglow of seeing this majestic creature, birding the rough land alongside us produced a lovely **Bull-headed Shrike**, several **Daurian Redstarts**, more **Rustic Buntings** which were also followed by a pair of **Siberian Accentors**, great close-up views! Further along there was a **Long-tailed Rosefinch**, several **Hawfinches** and **White Wagtails** as the light began to fade and we started our journey to our accommodation.

Day 4; 24th January

With only a short drive from our accommodation we were out in the field very early this morning looking at ducks in the mist. **Tufted Duck**, **Smew**, **Goosander**, **Eastern Spot-billed Duck**, **Common Pochard** alongside **Grey Heron** and **Great Egret** revealed themselves through the murk. Further along the river we got out for a walk with the most magnificent hoar frost covering absolutely every tree and blade of grass in a white coating but crikey it was cold! Still, fortune favours the bold and it did not take long before we were enjoying really great views of male and female **Meadow Buntings**, really beautiful birds singing in the early morning sunshine. Next we endured a walk around the farmland in search of Japanese Quail, completely failing to find any but we did come across **Far Eastern (Japanese) Skylark** on the ground giving us time to study them as well as large flocks of **Brambling** and **Oriental Greenfinch** in the icy trees. **Bull-headed Shrike** was another nice bird and a group of **Rustic Buntings** feeding on seeds also contained a few **Meadow Buntings** for even better views than before. Raptors included **Peregrine**, **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** and **Eastern Buzzard**. A cold walk, some nice birds but incredible scenery due to the frost.



We moved further down this river, the identity of which I have been asked not to reveal due its sensitivity to disturbance to the main target species of the morning: **Scaly-sided Merganser**. By stopping at various locations along the river it did not take us that long to find our first of this rare

duck but due to distance and intense light it did take us longer to find a spot where we could get really good views. The funny long crest of both male and female were easy to make out, even at long range, but it did take less intense light and closer range before we could really appreciate the scaly sides. Lots of other wildfowl was to be seen on the river too with excellent light on **Falcated Duck** and male **Smew** revealing them in their excellence while overhead a few **Cinereous Vultures** soared. In the river itself we also found at least 3 **Japanese Wagtails**, getting good views of this regional endemic and, of course, plenty of **Brown-eared Bulbuls**, **Magpies**, **Vinous-throated Parrotbills** and a few **Daurian Redstarts**. Another great morning was drawing to a close so we headed off to look for another special bird at another site.

Our drive took a few hours, plus a stop for lunch, eventually ascending a mountain range along a service road for a wind farm near Tabaek. On our way up Nial spotted some birds fly out of a tree that looked interesting and after parking and getting out his suspicions were confirmed with sightings of **Pallas's Rosefinch** feeding in the tops of pine trees. A flock of at least 6 birds were feeding in a roving fashion, frequently on the move but everyone managed to get good views of the colourful males as well as females. However, we had made the journey to this site for another species altogether. This location has been a regular one for **Asian Rosy Finch** in winter and after driving to a suitable scanning area we spotted the flock of 200+ birds resting on power lines and feeding in fields. Although we could identify them they were far away so we walked much closer so that we could see this species in detail. While admiring this flock we noticed that there was one very pale bird among them and with a bit of luck the whole flock took off and landed much closer to reveal a **Snow Bunting**, a real South Korean rarity! After some record shots of this bird we began our journey to our accommodation for the next few days at the coastal village of Daejin, enjoying a wonderful traditional meal in a local restaurant.

Day 5; 25th January

We woke up to a real treat, birding from the balconies of our rooms, sea watching for an hour or so before going down for a really good breakfast. Large numbers of birds could be seen in the bay in front of us with lots of **Pelagic Cormorants**, **Red-breasted Mergansers**, **Great Crested Grebes**, **Slaty-backed Gulls**, **Common Gulls** and a raft of 80+ **Black-necked Grebes**. Scanning the seas also revealed our first **Black Scoters** looking good in the early morning sun as well as a few wonderful **Harlequin**



Ducks. We were also able to pick out **Red-throated Diver**, **Pacific Diver**, some **Ancient Murrelets** and **Greater Scaup** for an amazing number of species before the day had even properly begun. After breakfast, as we were leaving our accommodation, we spotted an adult **Glaucous-winged Gull** sitting on the rocks right in front of our rooms!

The remainder of the morning was spent birding along several bays and harbours nearby but we spent most of

our time looking through the incredible number of gulls on the beaches and on the water. Although none of us (Nial excepted) would consider ourselves gull enthusiasts everyone really enjoyed the spectacle that was created by around 50000 birds in front of us as well as trying to pick out the many species within the flock with Nial's expertise to use as reference. We were able to get very close to the flock for excellent views and get to grips with very large numbers of **Slaty-backed Gulls** in all plumages, **Common Gulls** of subspecies *heinei* and *kamtschatschensis*, large numbers of **Vega Gull** and **Black-tailed Gull** with a few **Mongolian Gulls** here and there. We were also able to pick out an obvious **Heuglin's (Taimyr) Gull**, several **Glaucous Gulls** of subspecies *pallidissimus* and *barovianus*, a few more **Glaucous-winged Gulls** of various ages and at least 2 first winter **American Herring Gulls**. Quite frankly this was a surprising highlight of the trip for all of us and a very enjoyable session of birding; you can see many photos from this gull-watching session here – [East Coast Gulls, South Korea Birding](#). Another bird was found within this flock that Nial immediately suspected was a first winter **Western Gull**. Fortunately it was very close so I took many photos of this individual and on inspection of the photos it could be seen that the bird had many of the key features that should be present in a bird of this species and age. Later consultation with American gull experts confirmed the identity for another South Korean rarity.

Already an incredible day we were then to embark on something really special, a boat trip out to sea to get close up views of seabirds and to find some key *Alcid* species. Leaving the harbor there were **Black-tailed Gulls** everywhere and we had not gone far before we started to see rafts of **Ancient Murrelets**, groups of 20-30 birds diving as one in a game of "now you see us, now you don't". In fact everywhere we looked there were groups of these cute little birds. In front of the boat we could see **Pelagic Cormorants** everywhere and large numbers of both **Black-throated Divers** and **Pacific Divers** as well as **Red-throated Divers** and **Red-breasted Mergansers**, quite frankly it was hard to know where to look there were so many birds including more **Red-necked Grebes** than I knew even existed; incredible scenes. We had not got much further before the first **Rhinoceros Auklets** were seen and our boatman expertly manoeuvred the vessel so that we got really close to these wonderful birds with good light for viewing them. Throughout the trip we saw small groups of **Black Scoter** and **White-winged Scoter**, getting really nice views of both species. Next up was a **Long-billed Murrelet** and then the search for some of the other rarer species but with all the previously mentioned birds being seen again and again. Eventually we ran into an area full of *Alcids* with **Common Guillemot**, **Ancient Murrelet** and **Rhinoceros Auklet** all around and a few **Spectacled Guillemots** here and there, with many of these really close to the boat. A distant **Streaked Shearwater** was spotted and eventually we found our last target bird of this boat trip – **Brunnich's Guillemot** – enjoying 2 of these at close range to conclude our excursion, probably the birdiest boat trip one could imagine.

We spent what was left of the day scanning from the shore seeing many of the same species again, including more **Harlequin Ducks** at slightly closer range before calling it a day and having dinner at a local restaurant.

Day 6; 26th January

Beginning with another nice breakfast overlooking the bay from our accommodation. Much of the morning was then spent heading south along the coast, stopping at various bays and harbours to see what we could find. The first harbour held lots of gulls including **Glaucous Gull**, **Glaucous-winged**

Gull, Vega Gull, Slaty-backed Gull, Black-tailed Gull and around half a dozen **Black-legged Kittiwakes**. On the harbour wall was a first winter **Blue Rockthrush** and a male **Daurian Redstart** and spotted in the distance was a **Slavonian Grebe**. At another bay we got our best views of **Harlequin Duck**, really enjoying these colourful birds at close range as well as **Temminck's Cormorant**, not at all easy to separate from the much commoner **Great Cormorants** that are abundant in South Korea, also adding **Sanderling** to the trip list.

Continuing our journey southwards we made a stop at Soreoksan National Park and spent an hour or so walking around the lowland woodland habitat close to the park gate with a spectacular backdrop



of snowy mountains. Snow flurries let us know that it was mid-winter but we were able to enjoy some amazingly close-encounters with some lovely woodland birds. Flocks here included **Long-tailed Tit, Marsh Tit, Eastern Great Tit, Varied Tit** and incredibly approachable **White-backed Woodpecker** and **Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker** just a few feet away. Another patch of bird activity put us within a feeding group of **Oriental Greenfinches, Brambling, Brown-eared Bulbul** and some wonderful

views of **Dusky Thrush** and **Daurian Redstart**. This was a very enjoyable hour with superb views of all of these birds and some great photo opportunities.

Wishing to be in Busan the next day we continued driving south making a stop at Gangneung adding **Long-billed Plover, Black-headed Gull** and **Northern Lapwing** to our trip list before making the journey to Pohang, arriving quite late after taking dinner along the way.

Day 7; 27th January

Although our focus was on getting to Busan for birding around the Nakdong Estuary we spent a little time along the river near Pohang. This turned out to be a good site for raptors with great views of several **White-tailed Sea Eagles, Northern Goshawk, Hen Harrier** and the only **Eastern Imperial Eagle** of the trip, a rare winter visitor to South Korea. Farmland here held our first **White-cheeked Starlings**, some **Oriental Turtle Doves**, an army of **Vinous-throated Parrotbills**, lots of **White Wagtails (*lugens*)** and a flyover **Buff-bellied Pipit**. After this brief interlude we continued towards Busan stopping at a junction where we noticed **Chinese Grosbeak** feeding at the roadside and then another stop where a flock of **White-cheeked Starlings** were gathered on an overhead wire along with 3 **Red-billed Starlings**.

Arriving in Busan we went straight to the promenade alongside the Nakdong Estuary as the tide was falling, setting up our 'scopes to scan the large numbers of birds. Wildfowl such **Whooper Swan, Eurasian Wigeon, Red-breasted Merganser, Common Shelduck, Goldeneye** and **Eastern Spot-billed Duck** were obvious, a little more distant were **Eurasian Curlew, Dunlin, Mongolian Gull, Black-tailed**

Gull and **Grey Plover** but the birds we were after were some of Asia's rarer gulls. Scanning the closest patches of mud with the receding tide we soon found our first **Relict Gull**, soon followed by a couple more. Walking closer allowed us to get really good 'scope views of this really rare gull and we were able to watch them at length catching prey at the water's edge. We also got views of **Saunders's Gull** here, quite easy to identify although, in truth, rather too far away to enjoy properly but there would be another occasion to get close to this species later. Half a dozen **Eurasian Oystercatchers** of the *osculans* subspecies were nice additions to our list as were a few flyover **Black Kites** (*lineatus*) this being the best site in South Korea for them.

With this success we had a late lunch and then a walk around a wooded park on a headland for a complete change of habitat; first, though, we were able to study a couple of **Buff-bellied Pipits** in the car park. Entering the woodland we walked slowly and quietly, listening for bird calls coming across a few **Yellow-throated Buntings** before Nial heard some different bunting species. We waited patiently next to a small water source in the woods and eventually some buntings came to drink and bathe including a few *personata* **Black-faced Buntings** which were followed by our first **Pale Thrush** perched close by. In the background a very no-descript bunting was spotted and for a few of us this turned out to be a female **Grey Bunting** although getting the whole group onto this species was to prove impossible. Eventually the birds moved off and so did we, getting far improved views of **Pale Thrush** as we went. In a sunny spot on a rocky headland we enjoyed far warmer temperatures than we had so far experienced and a small group of foraging birds included many **Vinous-throated Parrotbills**, a **Yellow-bellied Tit**, many **Eastern Great Tits** and a couple of **Japanese White-eyes** while on the coastal rocks we spotted an adult **Blue Rockthrush**. More walking around the woodland produced little else although we heard Japanese Bush Warbler and more Grey Buntings without managing to see either. It was a short drive to our accommodation and a nice barbecue dinner.



Day 8; 28th January

In the early morning we spent an hour in the woodland park making another attempt at **Grey Bunting**. I managed a decent view of another female but for most people there were just glimpses so with this frustration we went back to the Nakdong Estuary for improved views of **Relict Gull**, finding 4 birds in the same place as we had seen this species the previous day. We also found a distant **Steller's Sea Eagle**, sitting on a sand bar, for our second sighting of this huge beast while in vegetation next to the road **Japanese White-eye** and **Daurian Redstart** posed for photos. Moving around to the opposite side of the estuary for better light we waited for **Saunders's Gull** obtaining better views than previously but still not quite what we were after. The same shorebirds as yesterday were all seen again including larger numbers of **Eurasian Oystercatcher** and there were at least 6 flyover **Black Kites**. Some islets with reeds and trees on provided us with some interest with a

Eurasian Hoopoe and the only **Greater Spotted Eagle** of the trip perched atop the trees and brief views of an **Eastern Marsh Harrier**. Birding the riverside park was enjoyable too with 3 very accommodating **Yellow-bellied Tits** allowing us to photograph them along with **Olive-backed Pipit**, **Yellow-throated Bunting**, **Japanese White-eye** and **Eastern Great Tit**.

After this we were on the road again and holiday traffic made us glad that we were only traveling a short distance to Junam reservoir where we were to enjoy one of the loveliest afternoons of birding. The reservoir is large and shallow and surrounded by farmland and woodland patches making it a real magnet for a wide variety of birds and we probably recorded our largest day total here. On arrival it was hard to know what to look at first, the **Naumann's Thrush** on top of a tree? The **White-naped Cranes** feeding at the back of the lake? The large numbers of ducks of many species? The flocks of **Eurasian Spoonbills** perhaps? Well, in fact pride of place went to the 3 **Swan Geese** feeding among the cranes, **Tundra** and **Taiga Bean Geese**. If you like raptors then **Hen Harrier**, **Northern Goshawk**, **White-bellied Sea Eagle**, **Cinereous Vulture** and **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** were on offer but



a flock of 50+ **Dusky Thrushes** which we were able to observe at close quarters in perfect light were one of the highlights. Among the commoner species that were in abundance we also found **White-backed Woodpecker** foraging on the ground alongside **Eurasian Hoopoe** and the first of several **Grey-faced Woodpeckers** of the afternoon. What else? Well, we got close to a smart **Bull-headed Shrike**, more **Japanese Pygmy Woodpeckers**, **White-cheeked Starlings** and the only **Common**

Moorhen of the tour although the close up views of **Falcated Duck** at the same time rather outshone this familiar bird. It is hard to use enough superlatives for this wonderful afternoon of birding that we all enjoyed immensely, however, all good things come to an end and we began our fairly long drive to our accommodation and an interesting meal.

Day 9; 29th January

After yet another fantastic day it looked like our luck had begun to run out with rain for the morning, however, this was to be yet another incredible birding session despite the weather. The 30 minute journey to Suncheon Bay was rainy and we had to put up with wet weather for the first hour or so but that did not stop us from getting point blank views of **Hooded Crane** as soon as we arrived. Finding a place to shelter from the light rain we were able to scan a large flock of Hooded Cranes and pick out at least 1 **Common Crane** with them. A large flock of geese included **Tundra Bean Goose**, **Taiga Bean Goose** and **Greater White-fronted Goose** and surprisingly at least 3 **Swan Geese** much closer than yesterday's birds – wonderful. Raptors were well represented here too with a **Peregrine**, a fantastic **Rough-legged Buzzard** perched on a post and a few **Hen Harriers** including a lovely adult male. Several **Eastern Buzzards** were loafing in the fields and then a long-winged, large buzzard flew in which landed for us to get decent views of **Upland Buzzard**; quite a collection of raptors here. A

few **Buff-bellied Pipits** were in the fields and in some nearby trees a flock of **Azure-winged Magpies** gave themselves away with their noise. Well, already it had been a good morning but there was plenty more to come. A local birder told Nial that there were a few **Sandhill Cranes** in the area and within half an hour he had phoned us to tell us he had found them so a quick drive round the farm tracks got us into place for us to get really great views of three individuals of this species. Another short drive around the farm trails and we flushed a **Brown-cheeked Rail**, but only seen briefly by a couple of us but then another fantastic bird as Nial spotted a pair of **Lesser White-fronted Geese**, the closest individuals of a large flock of geese making it easy for us!

With so many good birds at every stop it seemed incredible that we could improve on this but we decided to ride our luck and walk along some reedy creeks to look for different kinds of birds. The expected flock of **Eurasian Spoonbills** was along here as well as **Common Teal, Mallard, Goosander** and several other ducks. As the tide receded it left muddy edges to the creek where we found a couple of **Common Sandpipers** and a nice **Long-billed Plover**, close enough to get really familiar with. As we got right into the reeds we came across some feeding activity with a few *extremiorientis* **Black-faced Buntings**, several **Common Reed Buntings** and 2-3 lovely **Chinese Penduline Tits** doing what they are supposed to do, feeding on reed heads. What an incredible morning, in fact we had been enjoying it so much that lunchtime was rather late indeed and delayed even further by our third subspecies of **Black-faced Bunting**, *spodocephala*, on our way back to the car.

After refueling both the vehicle and ourselves we were back on the road hoping to end the day with something very special indeed. As we closed in on our destination a large flock of **Lapland Buntings** was seen in flight but we did not really have time to hunt them down and so we arrived at the edge of a large lake which was

covered in **Baikal Teal**, something in the region of half a million birds, most of the world's population! This was quite an incredible sight as parts of the flock took off and roved around before rejoining the main flock on the water. As the group watched this spectacle at length I took a short walk down the road seeing large numbers of **Dusky Thrush**, a group of **Azure-winged Magpies, Brambling** and **Rustic Buntings**. Back with the group the Baikal Teal were still performing as we left to head to our motel.



Day 10; 30th January

So far every day of the trip had provided us with really excellent birding and some wonderful moments and species but quite frankly we were running out of achievable targets with which to illuminate the remaining two days. However, a trip out into farmland around the Geum Estuary took us past several flocks of **Rook** each of which contained a couple of **Daurian Jackdaws**. In the

farmland several **Cinereous Vultures** were sitting in fields and then our main target; **Oriental Stork**.

Six individuals of this endangered species were walking around in the field quite close to us and we were fortunate enough that their foraging took them closer to us before they eventually flew away when a local, going about their business, walked close enough to spook them. Much of the remainder of the morning was spent looking for Black-faced Spoonbill. It was a bird we were not really expecting to find as very few



remain in this area in mid-winter and although we saw some Eurasian Spoonbills we did not find any Black-faced. **Hen Harrier, Tundra and Taiga Bean Goose, Mongolian Gull, Ring-necked Pheasant, Buff-bellied Pipit** and another **Upland Buzzard** were species we got good views of and one short roadside stop revealed a brief sighting of **Red-flanked Bluetail, Pale Thrush** as well as a flock of **Azure-winged Magpies**.

The afternoon required a drive north of Gunsan to a small bay/harbour where we arrived in time to see a large flock of **Saunders's Gulls** resting on the water very close to the harbour; finally we got the type of views we were hoping for, excellent. A lot of **Black-tailed, Common, Vega and Heuglin's Gulls** were also here but a walk around the headland in search of Tristram's Bunting only turned up **Rustic Bunting, Olive-backed Pipit, Oriental Greenfinch and Eastern Great Tit**, although when Malcolm and I went back to the vehicle to warm up we found a flock of more than a dozen **Light-vented Bulbuls**. Well, that was it for the day except for a **Eurasian Woodcock** that flew alongside the car for some way as we headed back to our accommodation and dinner.

Day 11; 31st January

Having seen so many of the birds we were looking for there was one very obvious omission – Pallas's Reed Bunting. Although we had brief views they were hardly satisfying so we took ourselves to the reclamation lakes and farmland at Seosan where there are decent amounts of riparian habitat along a canalized river. With some nice sunshine on our backs we were able to set up our 'scopes on the banks and enjoy a nice morning of birding here. Huge numbers of **Oriental Turtle Dove** greeted us and there was a large flock of 80+ **Eurasian Spoonbills** too. With six pairs of eyes it did not take long before we had found an area full of buntings and we were able to view lots of **Rustic, Yellow-throated and Common Reed Buntings** with smaller numbers of **Black-faced Bunting, Little Bunting and Pallas's Reed Bunting**. Finally everyone got really good views of this cute little bird as well as more sightings of **Chinese Penduline Tits**. A couple of **Bull-headed Shrikes** were nice but less expected was a **Dusky Warbler** heard calling and then seen in the reeds, amazing to still be adding birds to the list at this late stage of the trip. The profusion of birds here was lovely to see for our last

morning and there was a bit of everything for us here, raptors, wildfowl, egrets, passerines and even a few gulls, very pleasant birding indeed.

With all our targets achieved we decided to go back and take another look at **Steller's Sea Eagle** at the first site that we found it, the Han River at Paldang which was only a small detour on a drive towards Incheon Airport. On arrival we had a few hours of daylight left but scanning the river revealed several distant **White-tailed Sea Eagles** but no Steller's. Well we instead enjoyed birding



along the river seeing most of the species of wildfowl that we had seen here previously and all the common passerines that we had grown familiar with throughout the trip. In a quiet area under a large bridge we found a **Japanese Wagtail** which flew across to the other side for rather distant views and a couple of attractive **Meadow Buntings** feeding on fallen grass seeds along the edge of the rocks. Time was now really running out so we headed back

to the vehicle pausing to photograph a **White-tailed Sea Eagle** sitting in a tree above our heads when we all noticed another eagle flying along the river – a juvenile Steller's Sea Eagle in flight heading to a roost site in the mountains, what a fantastic way to end. All that was left now was to drive to our hotel near the airport and enjoy our last dinner together, a few drinks and a chat about the wonderful birding we had experienced in our eleven days in South Korea before flying home the next day.

Nick Upton.

SYSTEMATIC LIST – SOUTH KOREA JANUARY 2017

ANSERIFORMES: Anatidae

Swan Goose	<i>Anser cygnoides</i>
Taiga Bean Goose	<i>Anser fabalis middendorffii</i>
Tundra Bean Goose	<i>Anser serrirostris serrirostris</i>
Greater White-fronted Goose	<i>Anser albifrons frontalis</i>
Lesser White-fronted Goose	<i>Anas erythropus</i>
Tundra (Bewick's) Swan	<i>Cygnus columbianus bewickii</i>
Whooper Swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
Common Shelduck	<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Mandarin Duck	<i>Aix galericulata</i>
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera strepera</i>
Falcated Duck	<i>Anas falcate</i>

Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos</i>
Eastern Spot-billed Duck	<i>Anas zonorhyncha</i>
Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
Baikal Teal	<i>Anas formosa</i>
Eurasian Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>
Common Pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Greater Scaup	<i>Aythya marila nearctica</i>
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>
Stejneger's Scoter	<i>Melanitta deglandi stejnegeri</i>
Black Scoter	<i>Melanitta americana</i>
Common Goldeneye	<i>Bucephala clangula clangula</i>
Smew	<i>Mergellus albellus</i>
Goosander	<i>Mergus merganser orientalis</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Scaly-sided Merganser	<i>Mergus squamatus</i>

GALLIFORMES: Phasianidae

Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus karpowi</i>
Hazel Grouse	<i>Tetrastes bonasia amurensis</i>

GAVIIFORMES: Gaviidae

Red-throated Diver	<i>Gavia stellata</i>
Black-throated Diver	<i>Gavia arctica viridigularis</i>
Pacific Diver	<i>Gavia pacifica</i>

PROCELLARIIFORMES: Procellariidae

Streaked Shearwater	<i>Calonectris leucomelas</i>
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PODICEPEDIFORMES: Podicepsidae

Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis poggei</i>
Red-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps grisegena holbollii</i>
Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus cristatus</i>
Black-necked Grebe	<i>Podiceps nigricollis nigricollis</i>
Horned (Slavonian) Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus auritus</i>

CICONIIFORMES: Ciconiidae

Oriental Stork	<i>Ciconia boyciana</i>
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PELECANIFORMES: Threskiornithidae

Eurasian Spoonbill

Platalea leucorodia leucorodia

PELECANIFORMES: Ardeidae

Grey Heron

Ardea cinerea jouyi

Great Egret

Ardea alba alba

Little Egret

Egretta garzetta garzetta

SULIFORMES: Phalacrocoracidae

Pelagic Cormorant

Phalacrocorax pelagicus

Great Cormorant

Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis

Temminck's Cormorant

Phalacrocorax capillatus

ACCIPITRIFORMES: Pandionidae

Western Osprey

Pandion haliaetus

ACCIPITRIFORMES: Accipitridae

Cinereous Vulture

Aegypius monachus

Eurasian Sparrowhawk

Accipiter nisus nisosimilis

Northern Goshawk

Accipiter gentilis schvedowi

Eastern Marsh Harrier

Circus spilonotus

Hen Harrier

Circus cyaneus

Black Kite

Milvus migrans lineatus

White-tailed Eagle

Haliaeetus albicilla albicilla

Steller's Sea Eagle

Haliaeetus pelagicus

Eastern Buzzard

Buteo japonicus japonicus

Upland Buzzard

Buteo hemilasius

Rough-legged Buzzard

Buteo lagopus menzbieri

Eastern Imperial Eagle

Aquila heliaca

Greater Spotted Eagle

Clanga clanga

GRUIFORMES: Rallidae

Eurasian Coot

Fulica atra atra

Common Moorhen

Gallinula chloropus chloropus

Brown-cheeked (Eastern Water) Rail

Rallus indicus

GRUIFORMES: Gruidae

White-naped Crane

Grus vipio

Red-crowned Crane

Grus japonensis

Common Crane
Hooded Crane
Sandhill Crane

Grus grus
Grus monacha
Grus canadensis canadensis

CHARADRIIFORMES: Haematopodidae

Eurasian (Far Eastern) Oystercatcher

Haematopus ostralegus osculans

CHARADRIIFORMES: Charadriidae

Northern Lapwing
Grey Plover
Long-billed Plover

Vanellus vanellus
Pluvialis squatarola squatarola
Charadrius placidus

CHARADRIIFORMES: Scolopacidae

Solitary Snipe
Eurasian Woodcock
Eurasian Curlew
Green Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper
Sanderling
Dunlin

Gallinago solitaria japonica
Scolopax rusticola
Numenius arquata orientalis
Tringa ochropus
Actitis hypoleucos
Calidris alba rubida
Calidris alpina

CHARADRIIFORMES: Laridae

Black-legged Kittiwake
Black-headed Gull
Saunders's Gull
Relict Gull
Black-tailed Gull
Common Gull
Common Gull
Glaucous-winged Gull
Glaucous Gull
Glaucous Gull
Vega Gull
Mongolian Gull
Slaty-backed Gull
Heuglin's Gull
American Herring Gull
Western Gull

Rissa tridactyla pollicaris
Chroicocephalus ridibundus
Chroicocephalus saundersi
Ichthyaetus relictus
Larus crassirostris
Larus canus kamtschatschensis
Larus canus heinei
Larus glaucescens
Larus hyperboreus pallidissimus
Larus hyperboreus barrovianus
Larus vegae
Larus mongolicus
Larus schistigus
Larus heuglini taimyrensis
Larus smithsonianus
Larus occidentalis

CHARADRIIFORMES: Alcidae

Brunnich's Guillemot
Common Guillemot
Spectacled Guillemot
Long-billed Murrelet
Ancient Murrelet
Rhinoceros Auklet

Uria lomvia arra
Uria aalge inornata
Cephus carbo
Brachyramphus perdix
Synthliboramphus antiquus antiquus
Cerorhinca monocerata

COLUMBIFORMES: Columbidae

Feral Pigeon
Oriental Turtle Dove

Columba livia
Streptopelia orientalis orientalis

STRIGIFORMES: Strigidae

Eurasian Eagle Owl

Bubo bubo kiautschensis

CORACIIFORMES: Alcedinidae

Common Kingfisher

Alcedo atthis bengalensis

BUCERITIFORMES: Bucerotidae

Eurasian Hoopoe

Upupa epops epops

PICIFORMES: Picidae

Japanese Pygmy Woodpecker
White-backed Woodpecker
Great Spotted Woodpecker
Grey-headed Woodpecker

Dendrocopos kizuki nippon
Dendrocopos leucotos leucotos
Dendrocopos major japonicus
Picus canus jessoensis

FALCONIFORMES: Falconidae

Common Kestrel
Peregrine Falcon
Merlin

Falco tinnunculus interstinctus
Falco peregrinus japonensis
Falco columbarius pacificus

PASSERIFORMES: Lanidae

Bull-headed Shrike
Chinese Grey Shrike

Lanius bucephalus bucephalus
Lanius sphenocercus sphenocercus

PASSERIFORMES: Corvidae

Eurasian Jay
Azure-winged Magpie
Eurasian Magpie
Daurian Jackdaw

Garrulus glandarius brandtii
Cyanopica cyanus koreensis
Pica pica sericea
Coloeus dauuricus

Rook
Large-billed Crow

Corvus frugilegus pastinator
Corvus macrorhynchos mandshuricus

PASSERIFORMES: Paridae

Coal Tit
Varied Tit
Marsh Tit
Eastern Great Tit
Yellow-bellied Tit
Chinese Penduline Tit

Periparus ater ater
Sittiparus varius varius
Poecile palustris hellmayri
Parus minor minor
Pardaliparus venustulus
Remiz consobrinus

PASSERIFORMES: Alaudidae

Far Eastern (Japanese) Skylark

Alauda japonica intermedia

PASSERIFORMES: Pycnonotidae

Light-vented Bulbul
Brown-eared Bulbul

Pycnonotus sinensis sinensis
Hypsipetes amaurotis amaurotis

PASSERIFORMES: Aegithalidae

Long-tailed Tit

Aegithalos caudatus magnus

PASSERIFORMES: Phylloscopidae

Dusky Warbler

Phylloscopus fuscatus

PASSERIFORMES: Sylviidae

Vinous-throated Parrotbill

Sinosuthora webbiana fulvicauda

PASSERIFORMES: Zosteropidae

Japanese White-eye

Zosterops japonicus japonicus

PASSERIFORMES: Regulidae

Goldcrest

Regulus regulus japonensis

PASSERIFORMES: Troglodytidae

Eurasian Wren

Troglodytes troglodytes dauricus

PASSERIFORMES: Sittidae

Eurasian Nuthatch

Sitta europaea amurensis

PASSERIFORMES: Sturnidae

Red-billed Starling

Spodiopsar sericeus

White-cheeked Starling

Spodiopsar cineraceus

PASSERIFORMES: Turdidae

Pale Thrush

Turdus pallidus

Naumann's Thrush

Turdus naumanni

Dusky Thrush

Turdus eunomus

PASSERIFORMES: Muscicapidae

Red-flanked Bluetail

Tarsiger cyanurus

Daurian Redstart

Phoenicurus aureus

Blue Rockthrush

Monticola solitaries philippensis

PASSERIFORMES: Passeridae

Eurasian Tree Sparrow

Passer montanus saturatus

PASSERIFORMES: Prunellidae

Siberian Accentor

Prunella montanella montanella

PASSERIFORMES: Motacillidae

White Wagtail

Motacilla alba lugens

White Wagtail

Motacilla alba leucopsis

Olive-backed Pipit

Anthus hodgsoni hodgsoni

Buff-bellied Pipit

Anthus rubescens japonicus

PASSERIFORMES: Fringillidae

Brambling

Fringilla montifringilla

Hawfinch

Coccothraustes coccothraustes schulpini

Chinese Grosbeak

Eophona migratoria migratoria

Asian Rosy Finch

Leucosticte arctoa brunneonucha

Long-tailed Rosefinch

Carpodacus sibiricus ussuriensis

Pallas's Rosefinch

Carpodacus roseus

Grey-capped Greenfinch

Chloris sinica ussuriensis

PASSERIFORMES: Emberizidae

Meadow Bunting

Emberiza cioides castaneiceps

Little Bunting

Emberiza pusilla

Rustic Bunting

Emberiza rustica

Yellow-throated Bunting

Emberiza elegans

Black-faced Bunting

Emberiza spodocephala extremorientis

Black-faced Bunting
Black-faced Bunting
Common Reed Bunting
Pallas's Reed Bunting
Snow Bunting
Lapland Bunting
Grey Bunting

Emberiza spodocephala personata
Emberiza spodocephala spodocephala
Emberiza schoeniclus pyrrhulina
Emberiza pallasi pallasi
Plectrophenax nivalis vlasowae
Calcarius lapponicus kamtschaticus
Emberiza variabilis



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