Wildlife and Fauna of North Korea

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Introduction

North Korea, officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), is a land of many enigmas. Although frequently defined by its political and social opacity, the country harbors an extraordinary and little-known natural richness. Its geography, dominated by mountains, rugged landscapes, broad river valleys, dense forests, and expansive coastlines, supports a surprisingly diverse array of wildlife and ecosystems. The presence of such biodiversity within a region so often overlooked by international naturalists speaks to the resilience and complexity of life in the DPRK.

Despite the country’s history of isolation, its natural world tells a story as old as the peninsula itself. The mountains and forests, especially along the Baekdu-daegan range and around Mount Paektu, have been the last refuges for some of Asia’s most iconic and endangered creatures, including the Amur leopard, Siberian tiger, and Asiatic black bear. Wetlands along the coasts are vital stopover points for countless migratory birds, linking North Korea to global ecological currents reaching as far as Siberia and Southeast Asia.

However, the wildlife and fauna of North Korea exist under twin shadows: environmental challenges and human pressures. Deforestation, agricultural expansion, pollution, and the pervasive illegal wildlife trade—often driven by acute economic needs—have placed tremendous pressure on the country’s flora and fauna. The state’s involvement in wildlife harvesting for revenue, combined with weak enforcement of conservation laws, continues to threaten already-vulnerable species with extinction. Even so, small sanctuaries endure, such as the accidentally preserved Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), where the absence of people has allowed a resurgence of nature and a safe haven for many of the peninsula’s rarest species.

Yet there are rays of hope. North Korea has established a system of national parks, nature reserves, and protected areas, signaling an awareness of the importance of its natural heritage—even if practical enforcement remains inconsistent. The country’s remarkable assemblage of wildlife highlights the need for continued observation, cooperation, and dialogue between North Korea and the broader conservation community. Moreover, the DMZ stands as a compelling testament to nature’s ability to rebound when given respite from human interference.

This book is designed to illuminate the multifaceted world of North Korea’s wildlife and fauna. From its rugged peaks and pristine wetlands to the shadowy underbelly of the wildlife trade, each chapter aims to foster appreciation and understanding of the DPRK’s unique natural environment. By exploring its biodiversity, chronicling its rare and threatened species, and examining the formidable challenges they face, we hope

to inspire both curiosity and a renewed commitment to conserving one of Asia’s most enigmatic natural landscapes.

CHAPTER ONE: The Topography and Climate That Shape Life

North Korea is a land where the contours of the earth and the patterns of the sky profoundly influence the distribution and survival of its wild inhabitants. Geographically, it occupies the northern half of the Korean Peninsula, a rugged finger of land extending from the Asian continent. The country shares a long border with China to the north, marked by the Yalu (Amnok) River, and a shorter border with Russia to the northeast, defined by the Tumen River. To the south lies the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the heavily fortified border with South Korea. The Yellow Sea and Korea Bay wash its western coast, while the Sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea, borders its eastern flank.

One of the most striking features of North Korea's geography is its mountainous terrain. Over 80% of the country is composed of hills and mountains, giving the landscape a crumpled, almost wave-like appearance, which early European visitors likened to "a sea in a heavy gale." These ranges are not simply isolated peaks but form extensive systems that run like a spine through the peninsula. The Baekdu-daegan range is a significant part of this system, and within North Korea, prominent ranges include the Hamgyong, Rangrim, and Kangnam mountains. All mountains on the Korean Peninsula with elevations of 2,000 meters (6,600 ft) or more are found in North Korea.

The highest point in North Korea, and indeed on the entire Korean Peninsula, is the majestic Mount Paektu. This extinct volcano, with an elevation of 2,743 meters (8,999 ft), is located near the border with China and is topped by a stunning crater lake known as Heaven Lake. The area around Mount Paektu is a volcanic basalt lava plateau, with elevations ranging between 1,400 and 2,000 meters above sea level. The Hamgyong Range in the northeast also boasts several high peaks, including Kwanmobong. The Rangrim Mountains, running north-south in the central part of the country, act as a natural barrier, making east-west travel somewhat challenging. Further south, Mount Kumgang, part of the Taebaek Range that extends into South Korea, is celebrated for its scenic beauty.

In contrast to the dominant mountainous landscape, plains and lowlands are relatively scarce, making up less than 20% of the country's area. The most extensive of these are the Pyongyang and Chaeryong plains, each covering about 500 square kilometers. Along the west coast, where rivers like the Yalu, Taedong, and others flow into the Yellow Sea, wider coastal plains have formed on alluvial deposits. The east coast, however, sees mountains dropping more abruptly to the Sea of Japan, resulting in

much narrower and less continuous plains. The majority of North Korea's population resides in these limited lowland areas.

The rivers of North Korea are largely dictated by the mountain ranges, which act as watersheds. Most of the significant rivers flow westward into the Yellow Sea and Korea Bay. The longest is the Yalu (Amnok) River, stretching for 790 kilometers (490 miles) and navigable for a considerable portion of its length. The Tumen River, though the second longest at 521 kilometers (324 miles), is far less navigable due to the mountainous terrain it traverses before emptying into the Sea of Japan. The Taedong River, flowing through the capital Pyongyang, is the third longest and is also navigable for a significant distance. Lakes in North Korea tend to be small, a consequence of limited glacial activity and the stability of the Earth's crust in the region, which also means the country experiences few severe earthquakes.

North Korea's climate is primarily continental, characterized by four distinct seasons. This means it experiences significant temperature variations between summer and winter. The winter months, typically from December to March, are long and intensely cold, with bitter winds blowing from Siberia. Average temperatures in January can range from around -7°C (20°F) in the south to a frigid -23°C (-10°F) in the northern interior regions. Snowfall is common during winter.

Spring and autumn are transitional seasons, offering milder temperatures and more variable winds, generally considered the most pleasant times of the year. Summer, from June to September, is warm and humid, influenced by southeastern monsoon winds from the Pacific. Mean July temperatures are typically above 20°C (upper 60s F) in most areas. August is often the hottest month, with average daily high temperatures in Pyongyang reaching around 29°C (84°F). The country receives most of its precipitation during the summer months, particularly from June to September, a short rainy season known as *changma*. This can sometimes lead to heavy rainfall and flooding.

While the climate is broadly continental, there are regional variations. The northern mountainous areas experience particularly harsh winters. The southern region can lean towards a more subtropical climate with milder winters, while the central region has a distinct temperate climate. Rainfall also varies across the country, with the average annual precipitation ranging from 600 to 1,500 mm. The driest region is near Chunggang, while the area around Wonsan on the east coast tends to receive the most rainfall. Typhoons can also affect the peninsula in summer and early autumn. This diverse topography and climate create a mosaic of habitats, providing the foundation for the country's varied wildlife, each species adapted to the specific conditions of its environment.

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