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Wildlife and Fauna of Korea

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Introduction

The Korean Peninsula is a region of exceptional ecological and geographical diversity. Encompassing striking mountain ranges, expansive forests, fertile wetlands, rolling plains, and far-reaching coastlines, Korea forms a unique nexus of habitats that support an extraordinary spectrum of wildlife and flora. Despite its relatively modest size and the pressures of a densely populated and rapidly industrializing society, Korea remains host to a remarkable wealth of native species—many of which are found nowhere else on Earth. The story of Korea's wildlife is shaped by millennia of natural evolution as well as recent centuries of social and political upheaval, with both South and North Korea contributing to a biosphere of international significance.

Korea's position within the Palearctic realm provides a climatic and ecological framework that has enabled life to thrive. Seasonal monsoons, cold winters, and temperate summers have fostered a blend of boreal, temperate, and subtropical ecosystems. From the imposing peaks of the Taebaek and Sobaek mountains to the tidal flats of the Yellow Sea and the warm waters of the Korea Strait, each environment nurtures its own distinct communities of animals and plants. The peninsula's physical isolation for much of its history, punctuated by moments of connectivity with the Asian mainland, has resulted in a mosaic of endemic species, adapted specifically to Korea's landscapes.

However, the living treasures of Korea have not been immune to the sweeping changes of the modern era. Rapid urbanization, industrial advancement, habitat fragmentation, and climate change have imperiled the survival prospects of numerous species. Iconic large mammals—such as the Siberian tiger and Amur leopard—now exist more as emblems of cultural heritage rather than elements of the wild, while countless other species struggle against shrinking habitats and pollution. Even so, not all is lost: pockets of wilderness remain, restoration efforts are underway, and the rise of environmental awareness is shaping a new narrative of coexistence and protection.

A defining feature of the peninsula's contemporary conservation landscape is the complex patchwork of protected areas, spanning national parks, reserves, and the uniquely preserved Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Ironically, this strip of land—closed to people for decades due to political conflict—has evolved into a critical haven for wildlife, sheltering rare and endangered species and offering a model for conservation under unusual circumstances. The interplay between human activity and natural preservation is at the heart of Korea's ongoing struggle to protect its natural heritage.

This book is designed as a comprehensive guide to the wildlife and fauna of Korea, exploring the full spectrum of animal life—from charismatic mammals and vibrant

birds to the more elusive reptiles, amphibians, fish, insects, and other invertebrates. It provides an in-depth look at their habitats, explores the challenges they face, and highlights the concerted efforts undertaken to keep Korea's biodiversity intact—often in the face of daunting odds. By examining both South and North Korea, this guide acknowledges the shared natural foundation that transcends political borders, offering a holistic perspective rooted in the unity of the peninsula's environments.

Whether you are a student of natural history, a conservation professional, a traveler, or simply a curious reader, "Wildlife and Fauna of Korea" invites you to discover one of East Asia's most dynamic ecological realms. Through detailed descriptions, careful observations, and up-to-date research, you will encounter not only the remarkable creatures that dwell in Korea's forests, rivers, mountains, and seas, but also the stories of their survival—and the indispensable efforts being made to ensure their presence for generations to come.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Geography and Climate of Korea: Foundations of Biodiversity

The Korean Peninsula, nestled between the vast Asian continent and the expansive Pacific Ocean, is a land shaped by dramatic geological forces and a climate of striking seasonality. This interplay of landforms and weather patterns lays the groundwork for the remarkable biodiversity found within its borders. Imagine a place where towering mountains plunge towards intricate coastlines, and where scorching summers give way to frigid winters, all within a relatively compact area. This is Korea, a natural crossroads where different ecosystems converge, fostering a wealth of life.

Stretching southward from the northeastern part of the Asian landmass, the peninsula is bordered by China to the northwest and Russia to the northeast, with the Sea of Japan (East Sea) to the east, the East China Sea and Korea Strait to the south, and the Yellow Sea to the west. At roughly 223,179 square kilometers, including its nearly 4,000 islands, the total area of Korea is comparable in size to the United Kingdom.

Mountains are a defining characteristic of the Korean landscape, covering approximately 70 percent of the peninsula. These ranges, primarily oriented in a north-northwest to south-southeast direction, form the backbone of the land. The Taebaek Mountains run along the eastern coast, creating a dramatic spine that influences drainage patterns. Branching off from this main range are several secondary systems, including the Sobaek Mountains, which undulate across the southern part of the peninsula. While not exceptionally high compared to some global ranges, these mountains create significant variations in elevation and microclimates, contributing to diverse habitats. Notable peaks include Mount Seorak in the Taebaek range and Mount Jiri in the Sobaek range. Even the southern island of Jeju boasts the highest point in South Korea, the dormant volcano Mount Halla, showcasing the peninsula's volcanic past.

The mountainous terrain means that well-developed plains are relatively small and often separated by these ranges, primarily found along the coasts and major rivers. The major rivers, influenced by the eastern mountain ranges, tend to flow westward or southward, emptying into the Yellow Sea or the Korea Strait. Important rivers like the Han, Geum, and Nakdong have shaped the landscape, creating fertile alluvial plains. The Han River, flowing through Seoul, is a particularly significant waterway. These river systems, with their seasonal variations in water flow, are crucial for both human activity and aquatic life.

Korea's extensive coastline, measuring thousands of kilometers when including its

numerous islands, further adds to its geographical complexity. The eastern coast is relatively straight and steep, with sandy beaches, while the southern and western coastlines are highly irregular, forming intricate ria coastlines with countless islands. The Yellow Sea on the west coast experiences a remarkable tidal range, leading to the formation of broad mudflats. These coastal variations, from rocky shores to expansive tidal flats, provide a wide array of marine and coastal habitats.

The climate of the Korean Peninsula is characterized by four distinct seasons, a result of its location in the mid-latitudes and the influence of the East Asian Monsoon. This seasonality is a key driver of the peninsula's ecological rhythms. Winters are typically long, cold, and dry, especially in the northern regions, which experience a more continental climate akin to Manchuria. January temperatures can drop significantly below freezing, particularly in the north, though the southern coastal areas and Jeju Island enjoy milder conditions. Winter precipitation is generally low, with most snowfall confined to mountainous areas.

In contrast, summers are short, hot, and humid, dominated by the East Asian Monsoon. This brings significant rainfall, with a large proportion of the annual precipitation occurring during the summer months, often leading to concerns about flooding and soil erosion, particularly in areas that have experienced deforestation. Typhoons can also impact the peninsula in late summer and early autumn, bringing heavy rain and strong winds. Spring and autumn are generally pleasant with clear skies, offering a brief respite between the extremes of summer and winter.

This diverse geography and marked seasonality create a mosaic of climatic zones across the peninsula. From the warmer, wetter climate of the southern regions and islands influenced by warm ocean currents to the colder, drier conditions of the north, the variations in temperature and precipitation across Korea are significant. This range of conditions supports different vegetation types, from warm-temperate evergreen forests in the south to cold-temperate vegetation in the north and high mountains. These distinct floral communities, in turn, provide varied habitats and resources for a wide array of animal species, forming the foundation of Korea's rich biodiversity. The intricate relationship between the land, the climate, and the life it sustains is a central theme in understanding the wildlife and fauna of Korea.

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