

# Rock Ptarmigan

*Lagopus mutus*



The order *Galliformes* is composed of large, heavy-bodied, chicken-like, terrestrial birds including ptarmigan, turkeys, grouse, quails, partridges and pheasants. Members of this order display feathered nostrils, strongly decurved upper mandibles and short, rounded wings. Their flight is brief but strong; when flushed, these birds can burst into full, rapid flight from a sitting position. Ptarmigan are named for their feathered legs

and feet that serve as "avian snowshoes" and thus, belong to the genus, *Lagopus* (Greek for "hare-footed"). The word "ptarmigan" (Gaelic for "mountaineer" or "white-game") refers to their affinity for high alpine tundra and their cryptic, white winter-plumage. All three species of ptarmigan occur in Alaska, Rock Ptarmigan, Willow Ptarmigan and White-tailed Ptarmigan, although the Rock and Willow Ptarmigan are most common.

The Rock Ptarmigan prefers the high, barren, rocky slopes and alpine tundra, usually above treeline. Rock ptarmigan molt three times a year, confounding their identification. These large (36cm) birds are mottled dark brown, black, or grayish brown in the summer and white in the winter. They retain white wings and a black tail year-round. All male plumages flaunt a bright, red eyebrow (eye comb). In summer, the male Rock Ptarmigan is more yellow than the male Willow Ptarmigan, which is a deep rufous. The summer females of these species are virtually indistinguishable. In winter, the male Rock Ptarmigan displays a characteristic heavy, black eyeline, which is absent in Willow Ptarmigan.

While both sexes of Rock Ptarmigan make "clucking" calls, the voice of the displaying male is distinctive. His call is composed of low growls and croaks and noisy cackles followed by a quiet hiss, " krrr-Karrrrr, wsshhh."

The Rock Ptarmigan lays 6-9, 42cm cinnamon-colored eggs with dark brown speckles in shallow depressions lined with grass, moss, and a few feathers. As only one brood is produced per year, the female protects the nest by concealing it with vegetation until the clutch is complete. Although the male may remain throughout hatching, the bum usually deserts the female during incubation! Unaided, the female incubates the clutch for 21-24 days and cares for the young

birds. Fledging occurs 10-12 days post-hatching and the young are independent by 10-12 weeks post-hatching. Broods of young (sometimes composed of several broods combined) were observed in Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve from mid-late June. Watch your feet in high alpine country during this time!

Rock Ptarmigan are capable runners that forage on the ground for food. Their diet consists of leaves and flower buds of shrubs and trees (particularly willow and birch) as well as seeds and moss. Chicks feed on insects as well as plant materials. In the winter they move to lower elevations and browse on twigs and buds or dig up seeds from beneath the snow.



Rock Ptarmigan typically occur singly in summer and in small flocks in winter throughout most of Alaska, British Columbia and northern Canada and coastal Greenland and their associated islands. Usually, they occur at elevations ranging from 605-1920m.