

Hunting Himalayan snowcocks

By Larry Hyslop



A Himalayan snowcock in the Ruby Mountains

The Himalayan snowcock is a rarely seen game bird living in Elko County's harshest landscape. They make for memorable and very challenging hunts and very few hunters are lucky and/or skilled enough to bag one.

These birds were first released into the Ruby Mountains in 1963. Brought from the mountains of Pakistan, they are also known as the snow partridge, ram chukar and snow pheasant. In the Asian countries of Afghanistan, India and China, they live at elevations up to 20,000.

Although transplants have been attempted elsewhere in the United States, only here do they thrive, with approximately 500-600 birds in the Rubies and Eastern Humboldt Range. Their preferred habitat is above 10,000 feet elevation, on steep, rocky slopes.

The hunting season for snowcocks runs through September and up to November. Limits are two in the hand and two per day. In 2012, 121 permits were given out. Of those, 63 appear to have actually hunted the birds and a whopping total of five birds were reported taken, each by a different hunter.

Just for contrast, the chukar partridge was also introduced from Asia. Hunters would agree they also live in challenging terrain and hunting them is not an easy task. In 2012, 45,000 birds were reported taken by 10,000 hunters.

Don Klebenow was one of the few lucky hunters to bag a snowcock. His hunt began when he left the house at 2am to arrive at the end of the road in Lamoille Canyon at 2:30. He hiked in the dark past Island Lake, arriving at a spot he estimates was well above 10,000 feet elevation. He was high on Thomas Peak by 4am, still in the dark. As the sun rose, he carefully traversed steep slopes, often covered with loose rock as he bypassed cliff faces. He feels very lucky in that he jumped some feeding birds and was able to kill one in the air. That was it, the hunt was over with one bird and his only catch to date.

Russ Miller makes annual treks after snowcocks. Like most hunters, he has yet to bag one. The birds roost in the open on rocky slopes and fly off early to feed on grassy knolls. Russ's strategy is to hear their calls and watch them fly to a feeding area before stalking them. He hopes to climb undetected to a spot below them. If a cliff is upslope of the birds, there is a chance the birds will fly over Russ when he finally spooks them.

He has seen some beautiful sunrises and had the unique opportunity to commune with mountain goats at the very tops of the Ruby Mountains, but so far, no Himalayan snowcock.

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