

Only in the Ruby Mountains



Himalayan snowcock, photo by Bill Homan

For Christmas, I received a large poster showing every bird found in North America. Being a natural skeptic, I rolled it out to make sure it truly showed every bird. I looked for one of the rarest birds in North America, found right here in Elko County. There it was, the Himalayan snowcock and I decided the poster's claim was true.

If you have not heard of the Himalayan snowcock, do not feel bad. This game bird is found only in Elko County's harshest landscape. To see one requires a long, dangerous hike into the Ruby Mountains, to steep slopes above 10,000 feet elevation.

This is an introduced species. It was first released into the Ruby Mountains in 1963, brought from the mountains of Pakistan. In Asia, they are also known as the snow partridge, ram chukar and snow pheasant. They are found in Pakistan, Afghanistan, India and China, where they live at ultra-high elevations up to 20,000-feet.

They have been released elsewhere in the United States, but have thrived only here along the ridges of the Ruby Mountains. Approximately 500-600 birds live in the Rubies and Eastern Humboldt Range.

They are large birds, about 28-inches from beak to tail feathers, and stand about 14-inches tall. The body is mottled and the face and neck are white, ringed by darker feathers. To see photos of Himalayan snowcocks, check out www.backpackingintherubymountains.info.

Spotting a Snowcock is not easy, due to the high elevations, cliff ledges and steep slopes. The high Rubies can be a dangerous area for people unaccustomed to its slopes. During winter, they have been seen down near the Lion's Camp but always in steep terrain.

If I was going to advise someone how to see a snowcock, I would say arrive at Lamoille Canyon's End of the Road trailhead at 4 am on a summer morning. Hike to Island Lake in the dark and be high above the lake when it begins getting light. In early morning, these birds typically move from their roost on a cliff face to land on a steep slope, where they then move slowly uphill, eating plant material.

Listen carefully, since you will hear them first, giving their weird whistles and chuckles as they move. Using binoculars, check the upper edges of the cirque walls surrounding Island Lake. Be aware, you will probably see them in flight first and when they land, they immediately run along the ground. Do not search the landing spot but check a ring around that spot.

As soon as they spot you, they will jump in the air, diving downslope. After a few wing flaps, they will bank to soar across the slope, covering in a few seconds what will take you an hour to follow. My sightings have usually lasted only a few seconds as they jumped up and soared away. But that is ok, that brief view of the rare Himalayan snowcock, along with being high in the Ruby Mountains at dawn, is well worth the climb.

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