

# White-tailed Ptarmigan

*(Lagopus leucurus)*

**M**ORE THAN ANY OTHER grouse, ptarmigan seem unconcerned about humans. When approached, these birds rarely fly, and sometimes they will even let you watch as they feed their young.

I last saw white-tailed ptarmigan in late August at Upper Rumble Lake in the Swan Range, which at 8,000 feet is the highest northwestern Montana lake that supports fish. A hen softly hooted as she shuffled her chicks through the boulders and alpine flowers near the lakeshore. Later that day in the alpine meadows above the lake, my son and I watched as a flock of about ten ptarmigan hopped from snow patch to flower patch.

White-tailed ptarmigan have one of the most limited distributions of any watchable wildlife species in Montana, so they are not particularly easy to find. I've seen them only in the high country of the Swan Range, Jewel Basin, Glacier National Park, and the Great Bear Wilderness. I consider spotting one of these birds a kind of "viewing trophy."

## APPEARANCE

The white-tailed ptarmigan is the only ptarmigan species found south of Canada. It's the smallest member of the grouse family in North America, averaging about a foot in length and weighing less than a pound. Unlike North America's other two ptarmigan species, the white-tailed ptarmigan has

a white tail year-round, thus its scientific name, a Latinized version of the Greek *leukos* (white) and *oura* (tail.) The white-tailed ptarmigan is a mottled gray brown in the summer with a white tail, underside, and wings. In the fall, both sexes turn reddish brown before white feathers begin replacing the darker ones. By early winter, males and females are all white except for a black bill and eyes. Feathered legs and feet act as snowshoes so the bird can walk atop snow.

## FOOD

In winter, white-tailed ptarmigan eat conifer needles and the buds and twigs of alders and alpine willows. During the summer, the birds eat the leaves and flowers of alpine plants as well as lichens, berries, seeds, and insects.

## COURTSHIP AND REPRODUCTION

Male white-tailed ptarmigan maintain their breeding territories through aggressive displays. To ward off other males, they run stiffly at the intruder, while flaring their scarlet eye combs and cackling loudly.

White-tailed ptarmigan are one of the few monogamous species in the grouse family. In a study of reproduction in Glacier National Park, researcher David Benson found that the vigilant male forages alongside its mate in the open alpine environment, keeping her from breeding with other males. As a result, only three percent of chicks were



PHOTO BY TOM ULRICH

born from breeding outside monogamous pairs.

Females breed at about one year of age and lay four to seven eggs. They build their nests in the alpine tundra away from the breeding area in a shallow depression lined with lichens, leaves, and grass. Incubation lasts about three weeks. After the chicks emerge in mid- to late July, the female and her brood rejoin the male.

## HABITAT

A truly alpine bird, the white-tailed ptarmigan is found almost exclusively above timberline, summer and winter. In May and June, the birds breed in areas where water and willow shrubs are nearby. After the chicks hatch, the hen and her brood spend the summer in moist meadows containing lush vegetation and boulders.

The white-tailed ptarmigan's

protective coloration keeps the birds hidden from predators, which are mainly golden eagles and other raptors. Ptarmigan also hide out among boulders, overhanging snowfields, and low shrubs.

## STATUS IN MONTANA

In Montana, the white-tailed ptarmigan is found only in a few mountain ranges in the state's northwestern region. Due to its limited distribution, this native bird is classified as a species of special concern in Montana. Although it is also classified as a game bird, no hunting for the species is currently permitted. According to Jim Cross, a former FWP wildlife manager in northwestern Montana, ptarmigan occur in naturally low densities and will probably never reach huntable numbers. "Pursuing them with a camera is a great way to go," he says. 🐾

BY JOHN FRALEY

John Fraley is an FWP information officer at Kalispell.