

Snow Angel

By Saraiya Ruano

July 3rd I found myself walking on a narrow trail through alpine tundra with twenty other birders at the Young Birders' Conference. The grass, if that's what it can be called, is short and what few flowers there are grow low, hugging the ground and producing miniature blooms of yellow or white. Rocky outcroppings accent the landscape with jagged projections and lumpy, moss-covered eyesores. Just below us in a valley – below tree line – are bluish-green conifers, and somewhere far off a Three-toed Woodpecker drums.

So if the valley already has one bird more than this alpine emptiness, why are we here and not there? The answer is because it's not empty. The tundra is not wetland, where an abundance of birds come to you. Rather, it is a hidden treasure chest whose myriad secrets you must find yourself.

We were searching for the White-tailed Ptarmigan, the smallest of ptarmigans coming in at about a foot long. They belong to the order Galliformes, family Phasianidae, and genus Lagopus. In a sense, they are wild chickens. This chunky, foot-ball shaped bird was a target bird for the conference, and a lifer for many of us.

I had not thought much of ptarmigans before this trip. In fact, the only other time I've run across the name was quite away back, when I was still in elementary school. I was camping with my grandparents in Mueller State Park. We were strolling along the paved road when we passed a small island in the road where butterscotch scented Ponderosas stood. Unexpectedly, a bird came charging out squawking. He persistently attacked us in an agitated manner and I vaguely remember my grandpa picking up a stick for defense. When we returned to the trailer I made a drawing of this funny bird with red eyes and promptly labeled it "the pesky bird". "The pesky bird" would go down as a legend in my mind. A ranger later told us it was a "Mountain Ptarmigan". I would later discover his red eyes were actually red eye combs or "eyebrows" which flare out when protecting territory.

The day I was out with the YBC I was unsure of what to look for. A field guide can only help you so much. Everyone was examining the rocks very closely, so I did too. They must be awfully hard to distinguish from rocks because there were several false alarms, which we called "rock" ptarmigans. I had a lot of "rock" ptarmigans, one which particularly stumped me. It had a funny projection to the left which, to the untrained eye, looked like a bird's neck. I was embarrassed after someone checked it in the scope for me.

"Is this what you're seeing?" said Michael O'Brien after setting up the scope.

"Yes, it's just a rock", I replied with a sinking feeling.

We left the first area disappointed. However, I did see American Pipits which were new for me. I enjoyed seeing them fly up in the air, singing in soft whispers. The next tundra trail was more occupied with touristy types. One of the first things we saw was a chubby rodent called a pika. It let out an occasional "peek!", its body jolting as if putting its whole energy into that one syllable. We also saw fat marmots, yellowish-brown in color. The marmots seemed particularly frisky for such fat creatures, chasing each other playfully across the tundra.

The group began to walk the trail, stopping purposefully every so often to scan for ptarmigan. Finally, after numerous "rock" ptarmigans someone called that they found a real one. At first, I came running up the trail. Bill Schmoker told me to take my time, the birds "weren't going anywhere". When I first arrived I saw nothing but rock. Then, there was the tiniest flicker of movement and what was once rock gave way to the form of a handsome bird with a white-

belly and fleshy red eyebrows. After closer inspection I picked out the female, crouched low on rocks matching her cryptic plumage. She lacked the male's bold white accents. They made no sound, calmly pecking at low lying vegetation. I learned that ptarmigan feed on Alpine Avens and a whitish plant called American Bistort from Louise Zemaite. I also found out, from Steve Howell, that its scientific name refers to its rabbit like feet, which are feathered down to the toes.

We must have stayed for an hour, taking photos and peeking through scopes. I wanted to memorize every second of this rare moment. I wanted to remember the plump contours of the bird's body. I wanted to remember those dot-like eyes and docile expression. The "pesky bird" was not a nuisance anymore, just an alpine angel hiding among rocks and unbeknown to passersby. A raptor flew in the distance and there was talk of how cool it would be if the birds flushed.

Several hikers stopped to see what we birders were gawking at. A lady spotted one of us stepping on vegetation and called out shrilly "Sir, please don't step on the tundra! Sir! The tundra takes 500 years to grow back! Please don't step on the tundra!" I heard Steve Howell mumble something about this not necessarily being true, as they used to think similarly about the rainforest when in actuality it was able to grow back in 100 years. At this moment, seeing people walk nonchalantly right by us, I realized how unaware the general public is. How many people walked right by these ptarmigan? How many people even know what a ptarmigan is? What is the tundra to them? What is the tundra to me?

Tundra comes from the Finnish word *tunturia*, meaning "treeless plain". It is slow to produce with a growing season of 180 days. Energy and nutrients come from dead organic material. The tundra is a place of dwarf everything. There are only about 200 species of alpine plants. The vegetation includes tussock grasses, dwarf trees and willows, small leafed shrubs, and heaths. In the dictionary, heath is associated with barren waste-land, implying a land of no use. I beg to differ, alpine tundra is not barren at all, nor does it have no use! Low biodiversity is made up for in that a single rare species is worth more than a whole slew of common ones! Take our White-tailed Ptarmigans for example. I can't say its exact purpose in the biological world but I know this from a quote I read in a magazine: "The last word in ignorance is the man who says of an animal or plant: "What good is it?" If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not. If the biota, in the course of aeons, has built something we like but do not understand, then who but a fool would discard seemingly useless parts? To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering."

Out of three ptarmigan species in North America, White-tailed is the only endemic. The word "ptarmigan" is thought to come from the Gaelic word "tarmachan" which means mountaineer, white game, and/or croaker. The White-tailed Ptarmigan is found in southeastern Alaska, the Yukon to northern Washington and Montana, and the Rocky Mountains of Colorado to New Mexico. It's been reintroduced to the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Uinta Mountains, and Pikes Peak (in 1975). Ptarmigans, good fliers over short distances, prefer to walk and conserve valuable energy. Its wing beats are strong, swift, rapid, and short. It also roosts in snow banks to stay warm. It goes through three annual molts, including all white plumage in winter. The cryptic coloring changes to match the seasons of its rocky habitat.

Ptarmigans are monogamous. During courtship, the male fans his tail, struts, and bobs his head. The female lays 2 to 8 eggs in a nest built on steep slopes or rocks above timberline. Incubation lasts 20 to 24 days. The young are precocial, ready to walk and feed themselves a few hours after hatching. This early independence of chicks is called nidifugous. They will take their first flight in 7 to 21 days. White-tailed Ptarmigans are social in the nonbreeding season when

dozens roost together. In winter, the male stays above timberline and the female goes below where willow is taller and denser.

The White-tailed Ptarmigan is not of dire status although it's protected throughout some of its range. Threats include habitat alteration (since alpine tundra is so slow to recover) and over hunting. Hunters are restricted by bag limits and season. In addition, certain developments may introduce more predators, like corvids, that reduce juvenile populations.

The "pesky bird" is the quintessence of camouflage (I now view rocks in completely different light). In the winter it becomes a snow drift and in the summer a whitish-brown hunk of granite. I hope to see the ptarmigan a second time. Never in my life have I thought so highly of a chicken! The White-tailed Ptarmigan is a master of disguise, a prodger of imagination, a maker of smiles, and an angel in the snow.

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