

The sport  
**WHERE**  
of hunting  
**THE**  
ptarmigan  
**BIRDS**  
is in  
**ARE**  
finding them  
**BY RICK HOFFMAN**

Ptarmigan frequent areas with rocky cover and short vegetation. These birds rely on their color to conceal them.



**M**ost every spring, Colorado's ptarmigan population experiences a boom. So much so, according to wildlife biologists, that there are 2.5 times more ptarmigan in the spring than the previous fall.

That being the case, why do half of the 800 to 1,200 hardy souls who hunt the estimated 100,000 ptarmigan in Colorado each fall seldom find — let alone harvest — this elusive creature?

My guess is they don't know where to look.

Now, before you start firing off letters to the editor accusing me of making condescending remarks about ptarmigan hunters, let me explain by drawing on my own experiences hunting ptarmigan.

During my undergraduate years at Colorado State University, I spent numerous September weekends tromping miles across the alpine hunting ptarmigan when I should have been studying. Sure, I enjoyed the scenery and being outdoors. But in all honesty, I was possessed by the novelty of hunting, and perhaps harvesting, this unique alpine grouse.

My hunting strategy was to meticulously scour the dense stands of willows above timberline because (1) I thought the shrubs offered ideal cover, (2) I consistently found piles of droppings in there and (3) my one and only encounter with a ptarmigan up until then took place in spring and the bird happened to be in the willows. It seemed like a sound strategy at the time.

Reflecting back, I realize the fallacy of this strategy was my lack of knowledge about the habits and habitats of the quarry I was pursuing. Yes, I was hunting in suitable ptarmigan habitat, but willows where I was searching were used by ptarmigan during winter and spring not late summer or early fall. Consequently, my hunts all ended the same way — with game bag empty and me full of frustration.

Life works in mysterious ways. After completing my undergraduate degree (without ever harvesting a ptarmigan), I was fortunate to spend the next 10 years studying white-tailed ptarmigan in Colorado as a graduate student and then as a researcher for the Division of Wildlife. I often ponder how the outcome of my hunts might

have been different had I known then what I know now.

Let's start with some biology. The dictionary describes ptarmigan as any of several pigeon-sized grouse of the genus *Lagopus* living in northern or alpine regions, having completely feathered feet and legs and undergoing seasonal changes in color. Members of the genus include the white-tailed ptarmigan (*Lagopus leucurus*), rock ptarmigan (*Lagopus mutus*) and willow ptarmigan (*Lagopus lagopus*).

Unlike its relatives the rock and willow ptarmigan, which occur around the northern hemisphere, the white-tailed ptarmigan is found only in western North America. This smallest member of the grouse family inhabits alpine areas from central and southeastern Alaska through western Canada into the Cascade Range in Washington and extending southward along the Rocky Mountains from Alberta to northern New Mexico.

Outside of Alaska, Colorado is home to the largest population of white-tailed ptarmigan in the United States. White-tailed ptarmigan occupy nearly all of Colorado's 4,000 square miles of alpine habitat. Areas where ptarmigan are notably absent within the state include the Spanish Peaks and Greenhorn Mountain, both in southern Colorado.

The absence of ptarmigan on Spanish Peaks can be attributed to the almost complete deficit of vegetation above tree line. Conversely, seemingly suitable habitat on Greenhorn Mountain has apparently never supported ptarmigan. Considering the insular nature of Greenhorn Mountain from the nearest occupied range (30-plus miles) and the limited amount of habitat available (less than 1 square mile), it is doubtful ptarmigan ever reached the area to establish a population. Ptarmigan also were historically absent from Pikes Peak but were introduced there in 1975.

Densities on ptarmigan breeding range vary from 4 to over 20 birds per square mile and average 8-10 birds per square mile. Variations in density are a reflection of habitat quality. At these densities, the statewide breeding population is projected to be 40,000 birds.

Come July, males and females without broods abandon their territories and move upslope to high, rocky and

**In winter, ptarmigan turn white to match their snowy habitat.**



windswept ridges. These sites, characterized by abundant rocky cover and short vegetation, are usually near snowfields, seeps or other wet areas. Females with broods also move uphill, and eventually, by mid- to late August, they occupy sites similar to those used by males and females without broods.

All sex and age classes remain at these high-elevation sites, using the rocks for concealment and feeding upon a variety of plants, such as bistorts, sedges and clovers, until the first major snowstorm in fall forces them to retreat downhill toward the willows.

Whereas ptarmigan occupy territories and form monogamous breeding pairs during spring, at other times of the year they are highly gregarious. What this means is if you are lucky enough to find one, continue searching the same area because there are probably others nearby.

You can increase the likelihood of finding ptarmigan by keeping both eyes peeled to the ground for fresh signs. The most tell-tale sign to look for is freshly molted feathers. Ptarmigan



© MIKE MAURO

undergo almost continual molt from late April to early November. Thus, they leave lots of evidence of their presence.

Another way to find ptarmigan is to systematically scan the immediate surroundings with binoculars, carefully examining every nook and cranny among the rocks. This technique takes practice. It's best to limit the search area to a 50-yard radius of where you are standing. The key is forming the correct search image in your mind.

Don't get discouraged if all you see at first are "rock" ptarmigan. Finally, a thorough search of a few areas will be more productive than a superficial search of many areas. Walk slowly and stop often to enjoy the scenery. Go out of your way to search any breaks in the slopes, such as flat benches or small swales. Of course, it never hurts to have a good bird dog along, if for no other reason than to cover ground.

Always remember that ptarmigan rely on their color for protection. In essence, you will need to practically step on them before they will move. Don't expect a sudden explosion of

birds in the air. Despite being strong, fast flyers, ptarmigan fly only when absolutely necessary.

This ain't Kansas, Toto, and these aren't pheasants. What can you expect? Since ptarmigan are unwary of humans, their most likely reaction to your presence will be to walk away.

Bummer! You just spent hours climbing in an oxygen-depleted environment, waiting for the glorious moment when you could put your wing-shooting skills to good use, and instead, the birds simply walk away with no apparent intentions of flying. Now what do you do? You could try running at the birds while simultaneously making threatening noises and gestures in hopes that they will flush, but chances are they won't. Besides, running at 13,000 feet elevation is not recommended unless you happen to be a world-class athlete.

The best way to get them airborne is to approach from the uphill side. It helps if you can maneuver the birds to the edge of a drop-off or steep slope with no way to go but down. Even then, expect the flight to be short and close to the ground.

Your chances of not only finding ptarmigan, but also enticing them to fly, are much better when hunting in fog or overcast skies. That's because avian predators, such as prairie falcons, are less inclined to hunt in bad weather. Somehow ptarmigan know this, become more active and willing to fly.

The behavioral transformation can be remarkable. For instance, without any provocation, the males might start flying around and calling as if they are defending territories.

A word of caution. Whenever venturing into the alpine, make sure you are prepared for drastic changes in weather by taking extra clothing, rain gear and a compass.

Since ptarmigan nest later than other grouse species, the ptarmigan season opens later to allow time for young birds to attain adult size. The 1996 season opens Sept. 14 and closes Oct. 6 except in specific game management units in southwestern Colorado, where the season lasts until Nov. 10. The longer season provides hunters an opportunity to harvest ptarmigan in winter white plumage. This opportunity is restricted to the most remote, lightly hunted units in the state to prevent overharvest once the birds

become concentrated on winter sites.

Overharvest is possible in local populations of ptarmigan that are well known and readily accessible to hunters. For this reason, consider removing only a few birds from each flock, then move on to another area. Avoid repeated trips in the same year to sites where you were successful.

Daily bag and possession limits for ptarmigan are three and six birds, respectively. Shotguns (20-gauge, 7 lead shot) and .22 rimfire rifles are the most commonly used methods of take. Handguns, hand-held bows, pellet guns and slingshots also are legal.

Rifles and handguns are illegal in some units; therefore, check the regulations for the specific area you plan to hunt.

There are no shortage of places to hunt ptarmigan in Colorado. More than 95 percent of the habitat is U.S. Forest Service land. Getting there shouldn't be a problem, either. Most alpine ranges in Colorado are accessible by vehicle. A four-wheel-drive vehicle will get you to more hunting spots but is not necessary for good ptarmigan hunting areas.


More adventuresome can backpack to areas where no ptarmigan hunter has boldly gone before. Other opportunities also await the skillful hunter who knows his or her grouse, for example, the possibility of harvesting a mixed bag of ptarmigan and blue grouse (see related article in this issue).

Wherever you go hunting, don't forget a fishing rod in case the ptarmigan decide to perform their infamous disappearing act.

Remember, 95 percent of the sport in hunting ptarmigan is finding them. Without being too precise, here are a few areas (from north to south along the Continental Divide) to try your luck: Rollins Pass, Rogers Pass, Jones Pass, Loveland Pass, Horseshoe Basin/Argentine Pass, Webster Pass, Georgia Pass, Boreas Pass, Hoosier Pass, Kokomo Pass, Mosquito Pass, Hagerman Pass, Weston Pass, Cottonwood Pass, Schofield Pass, Mesa Seco, Cinnamon Pass, Stony Pass, Imogene Pass and Ophir Pass.

Good hunting. □

*Rick Hoffman is a wildlife researcher with the Division's upland bird program. He works in Fort Collins.*

A black and white photograph of a blue grouse perched on a branch in a dense thicket of bare trees. The bird is the central focus, facing right, with its mottled feathers clearly visible. The background is a complex network of thin, bare branches, creating a textured and somewhat chaotic environment. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows, emphasizing the textures of the bird's feathers and the surrounding branches.

Blue grouse are most common in Colorado and can be found in shrubs near aspen forests, as well as high-elevation Douglas-fir forests and sagebrush territory far from trees.