

# Get Wild: Ptarmigan, the Alpine master of disguise

Columns [FOLLOW COLUMNS](#) | 2h ago

Mike Browning  
Get Wild



A ptarmigan blends in with the rock and snow in a high-Alpine environment.

Getty Images

The lark bunting is Colorado's state bird, but in our mountains, a good case could be made for the white-tailed ptarmigan. White-tailed ptarmigan (*Lagopus leucura*), also known as snow quail, live year-round in the rocky Alpine tundra mostly above timberline. And they are masters of disguise.

In summer, white-tailed ptarmigan feathers turn to mottled brown and gray to blend in with their rocky, Alpine surroundings. When still, ptarmigan seem to disappear into the rocks and tundra. But in winter, ptarmigan feathers transform to be completely white, becoming almost indistinguishable from their snowy surroundings. Another winter adaptation — just as humans wear snowshoes and gaiters — ptarmigan have feathers on their legs and feet for insulation and buoyancy above the snow as well as feathers around their nostrils to warm cold winter air.

Ptarmigan are the only bird in North America residing permanently in the Alpine zone. To help protect them from harsh winter weather, they burrow into snowbanks for insulation. One winter afternoon, while I was nervously kicking steps across a loaded Alpine slope, the bank in front of me suddenly exploded. After initially fearing an avalanche, I realized with considerable relief that the commotion was a spooked ptarmigan blasting out of the snow.

White-tailed ptarmigan make a quiet, low-pitched hoot and soft clucking noise. One can walk within steps of them, yet not see them unless they move. Although capable of flight, ptarmigan prefer the ground. They forage while walking, snipping off pieces of plants with their bills. Come spring, they munch on nitrogen-rich snow buttercup leaves. Willow catkins, mountain avens flowers, chickweed blooms and other flowers, leaves, lichens and berries form most of their summer diet. In fall and winter, they feed on pine needles, seeds, willow buds and twigs, using bacteria-aided digestion to extract the nutrients.

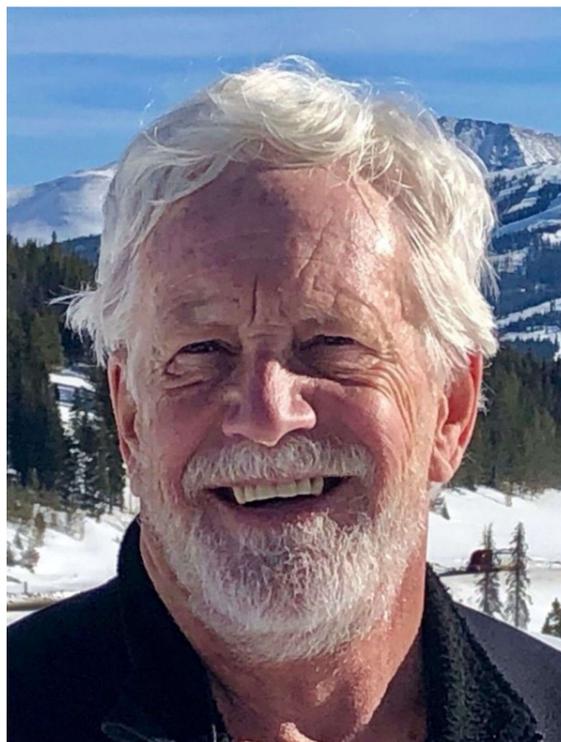


White-tailed ptarmigan are usually monogamous, remaining with their mate for the breeding season. Females scrape shallow nests on the ground, line them with grass and feathers, and lay two to eight cinnamon-colored eggs that incubate for about 23 days. The male acts as sentry, remaining nearby until the eggs hatch.

Ptarmigan chicks leave the nest within a few hours of hatching. The chicks feed themselves, initially on insects. Once their digestive systems develop, their diet shifts to flowers, leaves and other ground cover. Chicks forage with their mothers to learn what to eat, and remain with them throughout the summer and fall. If danger threatens her chicks, the hen will create a display distraction, running in zigzags with her wings dragging.

White-tailed ptarmigan are the smallest members of the grouse family, weighing from 11 to 19 ounces. They range from Alaska and western Canada to northern New Mexico. Although several species of ptarmigan exist in North America, white-tailed ptarmigan are the only ones found in Colorado. Natural predators include eagles, owls, foxes, pine martens and falcons. Off-leash dogs are a significant and increasing threat. And Colorado Parks and Wildlife reports that ptarmigan populations suffer from climate change, since they depend on snow in winter for camouflage and on moisture-dependent willows for food. And they don't tolerate temperatures above 70 degrees.

So when you hike above timberline, keep an eye out for our white-tailed ptarmigan friends. If you are lucky, you might see a hen leading a half-dozen waddling chicks across the tundra. And please remember to keep your dog on leash to help protect these native Coloradans.



Mike Browning

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Mike Browning is the chair of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit [EagleSummitWilderness.org](https://EagleSummitWilderness.org).

## SUMMIT DAILY

### Support Local Journalism

As a Summit Daily News reader, you make our work possible.

Now more than ever, your financial support is critical to help us keep our communities informed about the evolving coronavirus pandemic and the impact it is having on our residents and businesses. Every contribution, no matter the size, will make a difference.

Your donation will be used exclusively to support quality, local journalism.

[DONATE](#)



