A quest for snowcock

By helicopters and horseback, here's how one photographer pursued the elusive Himalayan Snowcock

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GARY KRAMER

TRANSPLANT: A Himalayan Snowcock pauses in the snow in Nevada's Ruby Mountains. A small population of the species became established here in the 1960s and '70s.

If you've seen the film The Big Year, you might recall a scene in which characters played by Steve Martin and Jack Black rent a helicopter to find one of the most elusive birds in North America — the Himalayan Snowcock. The segment depicts a hair-raising ride in and out of canyons and over steep ridges to get a glimpse of a snowcock.

I'm here to report that finding the bird is just as harrowing as the movie suggests.

The Himalayan Snowcock is a large gray, white, and tan partridge-like bird native to the mountains of central Asia. Snowcocks were first brought to the United States from the Hunza region of Pakistan in 1963. By 1965, the Nevada Department of Fish and Game had obtained 107 wild birds from Pakistan. A total of 19 birds were released in the Ruby Mountains, while the remainder were used as brood stock for propagation. From 1965 to 1979, birds were raised, and about 2,000 were released into the Ruby Mountains and East Humboldt Range of Nevada, where self-sustaining populations persist today.

In Nevada, the birds inhabit montane and alpine areas from an elevation of about 8,500 feet to the peak of the Ruby Dome at 11,387 feet. Like other introduced species, including the Ring-necked Pheasant and European Starling, they are self-sustaining and therefore allowed to be counted on North American birders' life lists.

My quest for Himalayan Snowcocks began when I decided to produce a book and photograph all 34 species of gallinaceous birds, more commonly known as game birds, found in the United States and Canada. Little did I realize how long the project would take, the effort it would require, the places I would have to go, how much it would cost, and the hardships that would be encountered along the way. It was way more difficult than I had envisioned!

Early on, I realized that due to access issues, the terrain they inhabit, or their low numbers, certain species would be a challenge to photograph. The Himalayan Snowcock was at the top of that list. The total population in Nevada is estimated at about 500 birds. They are among the wariest of all game birds, and when flushed, they don't fly 100 yards like a pheasant but instead zip a mile across a canyon. The areas they inhabit are characterized by steep slopes, shale-covered rock slides, avalanche chutes, boulder fields, and near-vertical rock outcrops. To top it off, for six months or more, their habitat is covered by snow.

EXPERTISE REQUIRED

After doing some research, I discovered that few people have firsthand knowledge of Himalayan Snowcocks. But I got lucky and found Larry Spradlin and Bill Homan — two guys who hike the Rubies regularly, were familiar with the birds, and were willing to help. In addition, I was also able to persuade my buddy Alan Sands to accompany me to the Ruby Mountains.

Due to the amount of camping gear, food and water, camera gear, and blinds required for a five-day stay, the only way to reach the appropriate areas was by helicopter or on horseback. Our first trip was in May 2015 to an area that was accessible only by helicopter. On a chilly morning early that month, Alan, Larry, and I met at the Elko airport, checked in with El Aero Services, and met our pilot. After loading our gear onto a Bell Jet Ranger

helicopter, we were bound for the Ruby Mountains. Our plan was to locate the birds from the air, then land on the nearest flat spot and set up camp.

Once we reached the Rubies, we flew over knife-edge ridges and in and out of canyons looking for birds, reminiscent of *The Big Year* scene. We eventually located several snowcocks, but they were in areas that were too steep and snow-covered to reach without mountaineering gear. Finally, we saw a pair at the top of a canyon with a suitable spot to land not too far from the birds. Within minutes we landed, unloaded our gear, and bid farewell to our pilot.

We set up camp, then headed to the area where we had seen the birds, each of us packing 35 pounds of gear — camera, lenses, tripod, blind, water, food, and extra clothing. We soon realized that our estimate of how long the hike would take was way off. The few minutes it took to fly from where we saw the birds to our campsite turned out to be a strenuous hour-long hike, all uphill! That day we heard birds calling in the distance but never saw one.

The next day we were up at 5 a.m., donned our packs, and headed back to the same area. We spent the morning glassing and listening. Around noon we observed a pair of snowcocks fly across a canyon. We viewed them for an hour, then watched as another bird flew to the same area. It was the peak of their breeding season, and we determined the birds were a mated pair and a single, unattached male. We watched as the birds called back and forth for at least an hour. We tried to figure out a way to get closer, but they were across a canyon, and there was no way to approach them without being seen. We returned to camp empty-handed.

That evening we drew up a new plan. We decided to start at 4 a.m. and hike in the dark to the area where we had seen the birds. Our goal was to get above them and set up a blind before daybreak. However, at 3 a.m. I woke up and peaked out of the tent to discover it was snowing. The snow fell for the next several hours, and by sunrise a foot of snow on the ground plus low clouds made the visibility horrible. The poor lighting would have made taking photos difficult, and the snow made reaching our intended destination impossible, so we aborted the mission.

To make matters worse, the visibility was so bad that the helicopter could not fly in to pick us up. As a result, we hiked off the mountain. After three hours, we reached the Lamoille Canyon Road and called a friend to pick us up. The helicopter was able to fly in a few days later and pick up our gear. To recap: On the first trip we saw a few birds but took zero photos.

TRYING AGAIN

The second attempt took place in August 2015. This time Alan, Larry, and I packed in on horseback to an area where birds had been seen above Island Lake. We set up camp as high as the horses could take us. Our routine was: up at 5 a.m., make a 1,000-foot vertical hike, set up a blind and sit for 10 hours, then hike back to camp, arriving about 8 p.m. The hikes were so rugged that each day, when we got back to camp, I was just glad I didn't hurt myself! This went on for four days. We saw snowcocks at 250 yards from us and heard them calling but didn't have a single photo opportunity.

The last day we decided to hike to a spring and hide nearby, hoping something would show up. We used the cover near the spring for concealment. Not more than 20 minutes after arriving, Alan whispered "bird" and pointed uphill. I found the snowcock in the camera viewfinder, focused, and pressed the shutter button. I got two distant images before the bird abruptly stepped off the rock and out of sight. So, on the second trip we saw several birds, and I took two marginal images.

Not being one to give up, I scheduled a third trip, for April 2016. Once again taking a helicopter, Alan and I returned to the same general area we had visited the previous spring but landed higher on the mountain. Bill Homan hiked in three hours on snowshoes to arrive ahead of us and direct us to a landing zone near where he had located several birds. The helicopter landed on a ridge top, but the landing zone was so unstable, the pilot had to keep the chopper in position with the rotors turning while we unloaded the gear. That was an experience!

We moved the gear downhill from the landing zone, carved a flat spot out of a sidehill covered with 4 feet of snow, and set up our tent. Bill showed us the area the birds were using and then hiked off the mountain, leaving Alan and me to fend for ourselves.

Each morning we hiked over a ridge, looked and listened for birds, then, based on our observations, set up my blind. Alan hid in the rocks above me and acted as my spotter, alerting me to any birds that I might not be able to see due to the restricted field of view I had from the blind. We communicated with hand-held radios. The first day we saw several birds but took no photos.

The next morning, we woke up to clear skies and really cold weather, probably in the teens. After hiking to where the birds were and setting up the blind, I was hoping for better luck with the snowcocks. At about 7 a.m., Alan asked over the radio, "Do you see the bird in the snow field above you?" As hard as I looked, I just couldn't locate the bird. Eventually, I spotted it 100 yards from my blind. I snapped a few images before it disappeared over a ridge. For the next three days, I spent at least 10 hours per day in my blind and saw birds every day, but they were always too far away for photos.

It was on the second-to-last day that we finally got a decent look at a snowcock. Alan and I saw the bird about the same time, and when he said, "Do you see the bird coming up the avalanche chute?" my answer was "Yes!" The snowcock walked up-slope and crossed a side hill directly in front of me. It continued for several yards, then stopped and called. I assumed it was a lonely male looking for a mate. That morning, I did in fact get some decent images of the bird that had become my nemesis (even if they weren't the full-frame images I really wanted).

AN 'ALMOST MOMENT'

However, the closest encounter was yet to occur. On the last day of the trip, we set up the blind on a steep slope near where we had seen a pair the evening before. It was so steep that we had to dig a flat spot into the sidehill so the blind wouldn't fall off the mountain. I had been in the blind for about an hour when Alan radioed and said he spotted a bird heading uphill in my direction. I could hear the bird calling but could not see it. Suddenly, I saw movement — it was a snowcock. The problem? The bird was standing on a rock behind the only pine tree for 100 yards in any direction, offering no photo opportunity. I pre-focused on a spot just above the tree, and if the bird walked 10 feet toward the top of the rock, it would be in clear view and in perfect light only 30 yards away. The next few seconds seemed like hours. Finally, the bird took a few steps toward the top of the rock. My dream shot was about to happen — *wrong!* Only a foot before the bird cleared the tree and would have been in the open, it jumped off the rock and was gone in a flash. It was one of the most intense "almost moments" in my 38-year photography career.

After five days on the mountain, we left the Rubies. I had snowcock photos, albeit not as many as I would have liked. The photos cost me more money (just in helicopter time) than any other dozen species in the book. They were the most difficult, uncomfortable, and daunting photo excursions I have ever experienced. At high elevations I get altitude sickness, nose bleeds, and I really don't like camping all that much, especially in the snow. But we persevered through it all, and I had images for the book.

After nearly four years of work on the book, I accomplished my goal to photograph Himalayan Snowcocks. For me, the book project heightened the allure of game birds and increased my appreciation of them even more. My hope is that my book helps readers realize the conservation of this unique group of birds is vitally important, not only for today but for generations to come.

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THE LONG HAUL: The author trudges up a snowy mountain on his search for the snowcock.

MEET THE HIMALAYAN SNOWCOCK

At approximately 28 inches in length, Himalayan Snowcock is about the same size as Greater Sage-Grouse. Wild snowcocks were brought from Pakistan to Nevada in the 1960s, and the species became established in the Ruby Mountains, in northeastern Nevada.

The birds tend to stick together in small groups and prefer rocky hillsides. Their diet consists of grass, shoots, berries, and seeds. They breed from April to June. Only the females incubate the five to 12 eggs laid per nest, while males remain nearby to watch for threats.

The species is a game bird, and hunters consider it a prize due to its remote, rugged location and its wariness. The snowcock hunting season occurs in fall, and from 2 to 23 birds (average 8) are harvested each year, according to the Nevada Department of Wildlife.