

Getting high on birds, in Oregon and beyond

by Stephen Shunk of [Paradise Birding](#) (Graphics are hotlinks)

We exited the tram at the upper terminal, nearly 4,000 feet above our vehicle. As members of “flight number one,” we were the first visitors of the day to embark on the summit trail. Not long after we set out, a pair of Pine Siskins squeaked overhead as they crossed the ridge towards the expansive swath of conifers below. (Illus: *Pine Siskin*)

Atop the mountain known as “The Whistlers,” named for its resident Hoary Marmots, our quest had begun. We sought some of Jasper’s most-wanted birds: White-tailed Ptarmigan, Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch and Timberline Sparrow. No life form is abundant among these craggy, talus-covered slopes, except perhaps the hardy lichens that cling to their brutal existence among the shale and boulders. We knew we might only see a raven or two, but just the chance for a ptarmigan or rosy-finch had us giddy with anticipation.



Pine Siskin by Larry McQueen

The Spring Beauties were in bloom, along with heather, penstemon, and buttercup. Tiny flies and a single butterfly floated just above the surface, avoiding the stiff breeze that whipped over the summit. I soon spotted an aberrant pattern on a large chunk of granite high on the ridge. I lifted my binoculars for a closer look. The figure was backlit by the rising sun, but I knew it was no piece of rock or vegetation. The magnified silhouette could only have been one thing.

“I’ve got it,” I shouted to my birding partner, “it’s a ptarmigan!”

(OMED: Probably, Shunk saw a White-tailed Ptarmigan, *Lagopus leucurus*, not the Rock Ptarmigan. Illus. is R.T. Wallen’s portrait of an Alaskan Willow Ptarmigan, which is a close relative of the White-tail.. Click on it for a better visual and additional background.)



Willow Ptarmigan
© R.T. Wallen

From the peaks of the Oregon Cascades to the rim of Steens Mountain, and from

California's High Sierra to Alberta's Northern Rockies, we always anticipate the thrill of birding in the alpine environment. The short growing season above timberline compresses the avian breeding season for the few species that specialize in this habitat. Herein lies the recipe for a superb day of summer birding.

A July hike to one of Oregon's alpine meadows can produce such diverse birds as the Spotted Sandpiper, Rufous Hummingbird, Clark's Nutcracker, and Red Crossbill. The higher ridges, slopes and remaining snowfields may host the Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch or the Violet-green Swallow. And the wildflowers above timberline paint rainbows across an otherwise barren landscape. (Photo: Nutcracker)

We expected the bird to flush on the morning's first approach of humans, so we scurried up the steep trail, hoping to stay ahead of the other hikers who shared the tram ride. The lactic acid burned in our thighs as our lungs struggled to siphon oxygen out of the thin alpine air. I had to lighten my load, so I dropped my pack on the trail and hauled only the tripod and camera up the remaining incline.

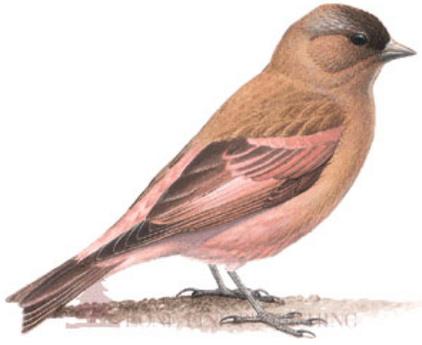


Another hiker had passed us and he proceeded to sit within 20 feet of the still-perching ptarmigan. The bird seemed unfazed by his presence, so I also approached. I set up the photo rig and started shooting away. Four film rolls later we sat stunned while this gorgeous bird continued to preen and feed before our very eyes. Magic saturated the air. The panoramic Alberta Rockies surrounded us as we worked our way towards the top of the mountain. I paused and smiled when I realized I had already reached the summit. (Photo Jasper Park)



Alpine birding experiences lie ahead for any birder with the initiative and the ability to hike beyond the crowded campgrounds and trailheads, and one does not have to travel to Alberta. Oregon does not host ptarmigans, but our share of high altitude bird life provides ample reward for the extra effort. On the way through Canyon Creek Meadow in the Mt. Jefferson Wilderness, Lincoln's Sparrows and Winter Wrens sing stories of their kin above timberline. The nutcrackers at the Crater Lake Lodge tell of flocks of rosy-finches just around the rim of the caldera. Wherever the adventurous birder chooses to meet Oregon's alpine bird life, a true peak experience awaits. (Illus: Rosy Finch)

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