



WILDLIFE NOTES

White-tailed ptarmigan

Lagopus leucurus

It's a small wonder that southern white-tailed ptarmigan are little known in New Mexico, for they live on the wind-swept tundra atop the highest mountains. In New Mexico, they exist only on the peaks of the Sangre de Cristo mountains, from the vicinity of Santa Fe northward to the Colorado border. They are perhaps the rarest game birds in the state.

Distinguishing Features

The white-tailed ptarmigan is a member of the grouse sub-family (Tetraoninae), which is different from other large birds in that it has feathers that extend down the legs to the toes. Adult white-tailed ptarmigans are recognized from similar birds by the large amounts of white in the tail and on the belly, legs, and wings. This bird lives in areas of tundra habitat. The blue grouse (*Dendragapus obscurus*) also can be found there.

Descriptive Details

These birds are small, weighing up to a pound. They have densely feathered feet and legs. In the winter they are a gleaming, snowy white punctuated by black eyes, bill and feet. During the brief summer they are mottled, spotted, and barred with black and white and buffy colors. Adults have a red comb over each eye. The eye combs are very noticeable, especially during the

breeding season. Measurements include wing length of seven to eight inches and tail length of up to 4 1/3 inches in males and slightly shorter in females. Downy young resemble domestic chickens but are distinctly patterned, mainly white below and gray to black above. Their life span probably does not exceed two or three years.

Distribution

The white-tailed ptarmigan, which is the only ptarmigan confined to North America, ranges from Alaska and the Yukon southward to northern New Mexico. Populations are found on Costilla, Latir, Wheeler, Truchas and associated

peaks (Taos and adjacent counties.) In the past this ptarmigan lived on all the peaks in that mountain range that had extensive tundra. There are also unverified reports of sightings from the San Juan Mountains in Rio Arriba County.

A successful reintroduction of the white-tailed ptarmigan into Pecos Wilderness areas in 1981 has helped prevent extinction of this high-mountain bird.

Biology

Protective camouflage during winter and summer seasons is important. The degree to which the white-tailed ptarmigan depends on concealment is legendary, and a



person can come close to tripping over them before they move. The ptarmigan eats buds, leaves, flowers, and when available, insects. Low-growing willows are their winter diet in Colorado, but a variety of other plants are also eaten when available. Males have a strutting walk when courting. This occurs in early spring. They also announce their presence with a series of cackling crows. Six to 12 dull creamy to reddish eggs with brown markings are laid by the white-tailed ptarmigan in ground nests. The eggs average 1 1/2 inches in length. The young are able to run and feed themselves soon after hatching, and broods have been reported in New Mexico from May through July.

Status

White-tailed ptarmigan are locally common over many parts of their range, but in New Mexico the species had become rare since the turn of the century. In addition to the areas listed above, the species was formerly reported in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains on Gold Hill, Santa Fe Baldy, Tesuque Peak, and apparently Pecos Baldy. In 1981 the New Mexico

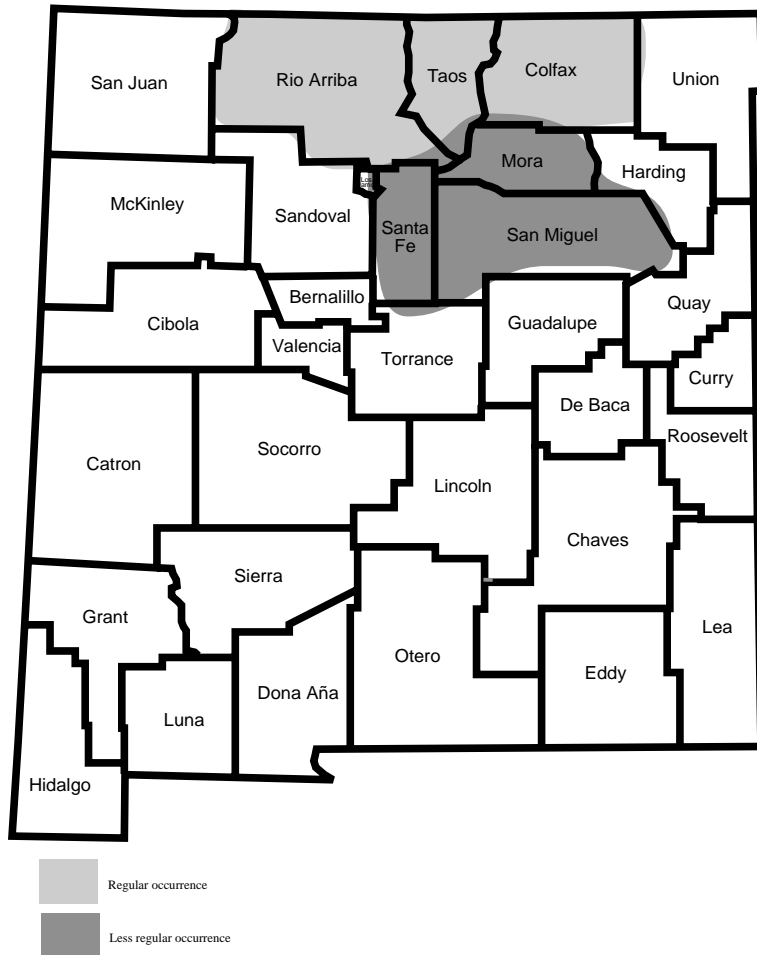
Department of Game and Fish, along with the Colorado Division of Wildlife and the U.S. Forest Service transplanted 43 birds into the Truchas Peak area of the Pecos Wilderness. Further sightings of adults and young shows the introduction appears to have been successful. The decline in ptarmigan numbers in New Mexico is due to many reasons. The use of tundra habitats by livestock, particularly sheep, and the increased use of wilderness areas by humans has also had a negative impact.

Conservation

Among their natural enemies are the goshawk, and possibly the bobcat, mountain coyote, and mountain weasel.

The ptarmigan has never been legally hunted in this state, and are on the protected list as are all other grouse. Their numbers are so sparse that any hunting at all could easily eliminate them from their last stronghold on the tops of our northern mountains.

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