



# Utah County Birders Newsletter

September 2024

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## SEPTEMBER MEETING

**Thursday, September 12, 7pm BYU Bean Museum and on zoom.**

Our guest speaker will be Cameron Cox, a birder and birding guide and author of the newly released "Terns of North America, a Photographic Guide." He will be giving a presentation titled "Terns, Making of a Guide." Please join us for this great opportunity to hear Cameron talk about his passion for birds and birding! (The zoom link will go out in an email the day before the meeting.)

LINK TO 2024 Challenge: <http://utahbirds.org/ucb/Newsletters/2023/2024Challenge.pdf>

LINK to 2024 Planned Field Trips: <http://utahbirds.org/ucb/FieldTrips/2024FieldTrips.pdf>

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## UPCOMING FIELD TRIPS

**September 13-15 Escalante NM, Kodachrome Basin SP, Escalante Petrified Forest SP**

**\*\*If you are planning to go on this field trip please text or call Suzi Holt at 801-329-2002\*\***

September 13<sup>th</sup> Meet at Kodachrome Basin SP at noon. We will bird and sleep overnight there.

September 14<sup>th</sup> 9am We will bird Escalante NM along the way to Escalante Petrified Forest SP.

You decide if you go home Saturday night or Sunday. If you have a State Parks pass, please bring it and any other essentials you may need for 2 all day trips.

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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

### President's Message:

In the past, I have mentioned different avenues to learn about and appreciate birds with videos or podcasts. When the weather is nasty, cold, wet, windy or downright miserable, we can still immerse ourselves in that wonderful world of birding.

I was recently visiting a friend in Park City and right there in front of me on the table was a beautiful book which immediately caught my attention. The book was "One Wild Bird at a Time" with awesome illustrations and writing.

On another occasion, a gentleman walking into a class at the Y with me started talking about a great book his wife was totally 'hooked' on, "Listening to a Continent Sing". The story behind this book was very intriguing so I had to check it out. Birdsong expert Donald Kroodsma went on a bicycle trip through 10 states from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific with his son David. Besides the book is a companion website. This website has (1) listening to the birds referenced by the number in the book, (2) listen by species, (3) by state, and (4) at dawn bird vocals.

So, check them out and enjoy birding, whether outside in this beautiful world or when you are forced inside. Also, please continue supporting our group activities, whether the informative meetings and/or the field trips.

Happy birding!  
Yvonne

## BIRD OF THE MONTH

### Himalayan Snowcock

Article by Alton Thygerson

Photo by Bryan Shirley



I thought the movie, "The Big Year," was a great movie—one I have repeatedly watched and recommended to others. One of the scenes in the movie shows just how crazy we birders can get. It depicts a wild helicopter chase looking for Himalayan Snowcocks in Nevada's Ruby Mountains—the only place where it lives in North America. Seeing this bird makes for a memorable experience and I encourage those who like birding adventures to try for it. Many excellent birders do not have this bird on their life list because of its small range in a difficult, rugged location and its very skittish behavior.

### General Description:

- The Himalayan Snowcock is large (nearly 2.5 times larger than the Chukar).
- Generally grayish overall with rusty-brown streaks on upperparts.

- Two prominent dark stripes on each side of the head.
- Whitish face and throat.
- Shows mostly white in the wings in flight. White undertail coverts.
- Voice clucks and cackles persistently while foraging.
- At daybreak, the birds usually power glide seldom flapping their wings downslope into open areas containing vegetation for food. During the day, they walk with a slow and steady pace back up the mountain eating along the way.
- The very restricted range and high elevations near the snowline or timberline make this bird unlikely to be mistaken for anything else.

Desert or semi-arid land covers a great deal of Nevada that limits the state's wildlife population. Because local hunters didn't have enough game birds to kill, the Nevada Fish and Game Commission thought it would be a good idea to import some resilient game birds, birds that could live in the state's harsh environment.

In 1963, state officials went to an area of northern Pakistan and captured six Himalayan Snowcocks that live in rugged, inaccessible mountainous slopes—such as parts of Nevada. Most of the birds in this first group died while in transit to the United States. By 1965, Nevada received a total of 107 snowcocks from Pakistan. Due to heavy losses during transportation, the Nevada Department of Wildlife decided to raise snowcocks on a game farm. From 1965–1979, 2,025 snowcocks were raised and released into the wild. Over the next two decades, wild and game farm-raised birds were released in and around Nevada's Ruby Mountains and slowly the population grew.

The snowcock was brought primarily to Nevada for hunters. However, another group has a great interest in snowcocks—birders (bird watchers). An introduced bird must live and breed in the wild for 10 years before it can be “counted” as an official sighting. Examples of introduced birds that birders can count for their North American life list include not only the Himalayan Snowcock but House Sparrows, European Starlings, Mute Swans, Chukars, and Ring-neck Pheasants, among other species.

Spotting a snowcock requires hiking through rough mountain terrain, putting in some sweat equity or a lot of money (like Steve Martin in “The Big Year” movie), and a lot of luck. The birders in the movie (and in real life) didn't have the time or the energy to do the hiking so they rented a helicopter to fly them up to where snowcocks live.

Seeing a snowcock requires driving to the Ruby Mountains just south of Elko, Nevada. The easiest place to find them is among the cliffs high above and west of Island Lake in Lamoille Canyon. Climb as high as you can before dawn breaks, then listen for their clucking as the first rays of the sun hit the highest peaks. Expect them to glide down from the cliffs and land on the steep, grassy slopes below the vertical cliffs. They spend their day searching for food. Snowcocks only fly short distances and mostly only glide downhill. Each morning, they glide down to a feeding area and then slowly walk back up the mountain, feeding on vegetation as they go. After an entire day eating and slowly moving up a mountain, they eventually reach their roosting area, where they settle down for the night.

If interested in adding this bird to your life list, consider going with a birding group. Pitta Nature Tours with Utah bird guide Tim Avery conducts snowcock hiking tours. He can also help you arrange a helicopter tour with a local provider (between \$150 to \$300 per person). A helicopter ride is not included in Tim's trips. In past years Mark Stackhouse also conducted hiking tours.

Dennis Shirley served as my guide. On August 27, 2009, Dennis, Grant Jense, and I left Utah Valley at 8:00 PM, drove to Lamoille Canyon, found a camping area with picnic tables on which we spread our sleeping bags, and attempted to sleep. Guided tours usually stay in a distant motel and depending upon their success some stay more than one night.

From the trailhead to the lake the elevation gains about 1,000 feet and features many switchbacks. The hike goes upward the whole time. Going from the parking lot to the Island Lake area is sort of like climbing stairs for about two hours. A bit of physical fitness helps. What makes this trail a little challenging is that most birders seeking a snowcock hike in darkness to arrive at the Island Lake area before sunrise. With headlamps and a backpack containing binoculars, snack food, and water we started hiking at about 4:00 AM on the two mile hike up the Island Lake Trail. I recommend trekking poles to help with balance and pace. Dennis also carried a scope. Depending upon your physical fitness and hiking ability, allow

between 90 to 120 minutes for the hike. Snowcocks begin calling at about 5:45 AM and you should be in a good place to hear and see the bird(s) about this time making power dives off the steep mountain ridges.

If hiking at night, some birders recommend going to the area during daylight hours just to become acquainted where the trailhead starts and other features of the area that may be difficult to see in the dark. Others suggest hiking during daylight and staying overnight to be near the lake at sunrise.

Be advised that going above 8,000 feet can produce one of several types of altitude illnesses. Altitude illnesses are caused by a prolonged lack of oxygen in the blood and tissues due to low air pressure at higher elevations. Acute mountain sickness (AMS), the least serious of the three types of altitude illnesses, can sometimes begin within several hours after ascending above 8,000 feet.

Dennis, Grant, and I set up an observation area above the lake and started scanning the slopes and ridgelines. The trip proved very successful—nine Himalayan Snowcocks were spotted!

#### **Sources:**

Alderfer, Jonathan (editor), *Complete Birds of North America*, Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2006.

Alsop, Fred J., *Smithsonian Handbook's Birds of North America: Western Region*, London: DK Publishing, 2001.

Dunne, Pete, *Pete Dunne's Essential Field Guide Companion*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006.

Elphick, Chris, et.al., *National Audubon's The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.

Jense, Grant, "Himalayan Snowcock," *Utah Birds: Journal of the Utah Ornithological Society*, Volume 22(2), December 2009.

Kaufman, Kenn, *Lives of North American Birds*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996.

Searched over a dozen on-line reports from birders and hunters offering suggestions for locating the Himalayan Snowcock.

Thygerson, Alton, et.al., *Wilderness First Aid Field Guide*, third edition, Burlington, MA: Jones and Bartlett Learning, 2023.

[\[See past Bird of the Month articles\]](#)

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## **FIELD TRIP REPORTS**

### **Jordanell SP-Rock Springs Area**

Saturday August 24, 2024

Article and photos by Suzi Holt



Our Fish Springs trip got switched to Jordanelle SP- Rock Springs Area because of the high wind warnings out in the west desert.

We had 22 birders join us! On our way in there was an **Osprey** platform with 2 Osprey!

We parked in the Nature area. They have an awesome boardwalk and trails system through the trees and over by the Provo River. As we made our way towards the trail we had a unexpected **Prairie Falcon** flyover! Then a **Great Blue Heron** flew off in the distance. We heard **Yellow Warblers** and a **Downy Woodpecker**. We had **Barn** and **Violet-green Swallows**, **Turkey Vultures** and a **Red-tailed Hawk** flying above us. We heard a **Song Sparrow** and saw a **White-crowned Sparrow**, then we were serenaded by a few **Black-capped Chickadees**. Jeremy spotted a sleeping **Common Nighthawk** a fun sight!! There were tons of **American Robins**, a couple unidentified empids, my guess on both was Dusky. We also had **Western Wood Pewee**, **Warbling Vireo**. **Northern Flicker** and **Western Tanager**.



*Black-capped Chickadee*



*Common Nighthawk*



*Warbling Vireo*



*American Goldfinch*



*Spotted Sandpiper*

By the Nature Center a Hummingbird darted off into the woods, probably a Black-chinned.

We had a flock of **American Goldfinch** and **Cedar Waxwings** calling and flying around us. **Woodhouse's Scrub Jay** and a **Black-billed Magpie** flew by, and more Ospreys were circling above. On our way past the Nature Center lots of birds were munching on berries, there were American Robins, Western Tanagers, and a **Green-tailed Towhee**.

We also heard a **Gray Catbird**. Down the trail a **Belted Kingfisher** rattled its call.

As we walked towards the lake we saw one **Lesser Goldfinch**. As we looked out over the Provo River towards the lake, we had a **Spotted Sandpiper** hanging out with a **Mallard** in the river. There were **Canada Geese**, **Great Blue Herons**, **American White Pelicans**, **Western** and **Clark's Grebes**, **Mallards**, even a couple

barnyard ducks. **Common Mergansers, Common Goldeneye, American Coots** down by the lake. A Belted Kingfisher was actively fishing, and **California Gulls** were on the shoreline as well.

I think we tallied 41 species with the unidentified hummer and empids!! It was a great morning. We finished around 10 so we decided to hit the Provo River Reclamation Area down below the dam. It was pretty windy as we walked the trail. Most got about 10 species some a few more, and some saw 2 snakes before the winds pushed us on. Thanks to all who came! It was a fun outing!

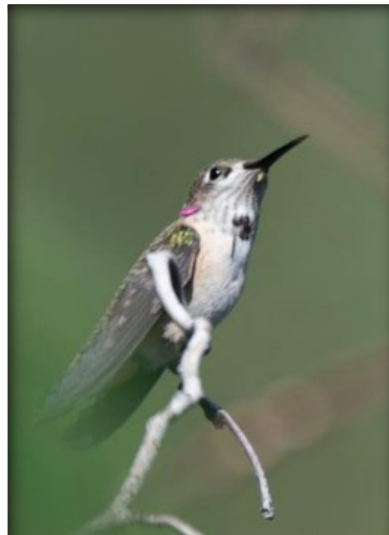


## Back Yard Birds

**Yvonne Carter – Highland:** Our **Cooper's Hawk** must be nesting somewhere else right now. I don't hear his call and the birds are sure active at my backyard feeders. Hooray!



Lynn Garner-Provo: Calliope Hummingbird at the feeder.



KC Childs-Orem: My best backyard bird this month as been a pair of Calliope Hummingbirds. It has been fun to see a male start to develop a gorget.



Suzi Holt-Payson: Young male Calliope Hummingbird.

