

## Elko, Birders and The Big Year

By Larry Hyslop



A Himalayan Snowcock in the Ruby Mountains

Birdwatchers have an image problem. Often called birders, they can be an obsessive bunch and I confess, I myself am a birder. We birders keep a life list, a count of all the bird species seen in our lifetime. Mine is 328 species.

We become especially obsessive when it comes to finding that one species that has eluded us. Cindy can attest to this during my prolonged search along the Oregon Coast for the Tufted Puffin. But I did find them and added one more species to my life list! This obsessive nature is evident in the recent movie *The Big Year*, but more about that a little later.

Elko is a serious Mecca for birders. This is the only place in the United States where they can add the Himalayan Snowcock to their life list. Yes, it is on mine. The Himalayan Snowcock was imported to the Ruby Mountains from its native Himalayan Mountains and lives nowhere else in the U.S.

Spotting a Snowcock is not easy, since they are seldom found below 10,000 feet elevation. Each of my sightings required a long and arduous climb. A lot of birders are not up to that kind of hike and the high Rubies can be a dangerous area for people unaccustomed to its slopes.

So when serious birders pull into Elko, they go straight to El Aero Services. There, they book a helicopter flight at \$925/hour, for a flight lasting a little less than an hour.

Ted McBride has been flying helicopters in the Elko area for over 40 years. He is retired but has flown hundreds of such birders on these flights, usually 4-12 each year. He said the ruckus started when the American Birding Association added the Snowcock to its checklist in about 1990. People became aware of this bird and 'flocked' to Elko to see one.

Ted's helicopter ride takes 15 minutes to reach the high country of the Rubies, where Ted flies along slopes until a group of Snowcocks jumps up and quickly soars down slope. The birders see the birds, although briefly, and add the Himalayan Snowcock to their life list. "Many are not much interested in the birds, just able to say 'I seen it'," Ted says. Most of these birders are older people who could not hike high enough into the mountains to see these birds.

Ted has never disappointed his customers in their search for Snowcocks. He tries not to fly during the birds' nesting season or during hunting seasons, and is careful not to be seen as harassing the birds during flights.

To return to the movie The Big Year, the main characters played by Jack Black, Owen Wilson, and Steve Martin, compete in 1998 to see the most birds in one year, a Big Year. Two of them rent a helicopter and search for Snowcocks in the Rubies. Ted is no doubt the pilot portrayed in the movie and he laughs at how he was depicted.

The movie scene was probably not filmed in the Rubies and the film crew did not use Ted or El Aero for the filming. However, in the original book, one of the three competitors was Greg Miller, played by Jack Black, who saw 715 species that year and Ted piloted Greg Miller in his quest for the Snowcock.

After all, Elko is Mecca for obsessive, competitive birders!

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