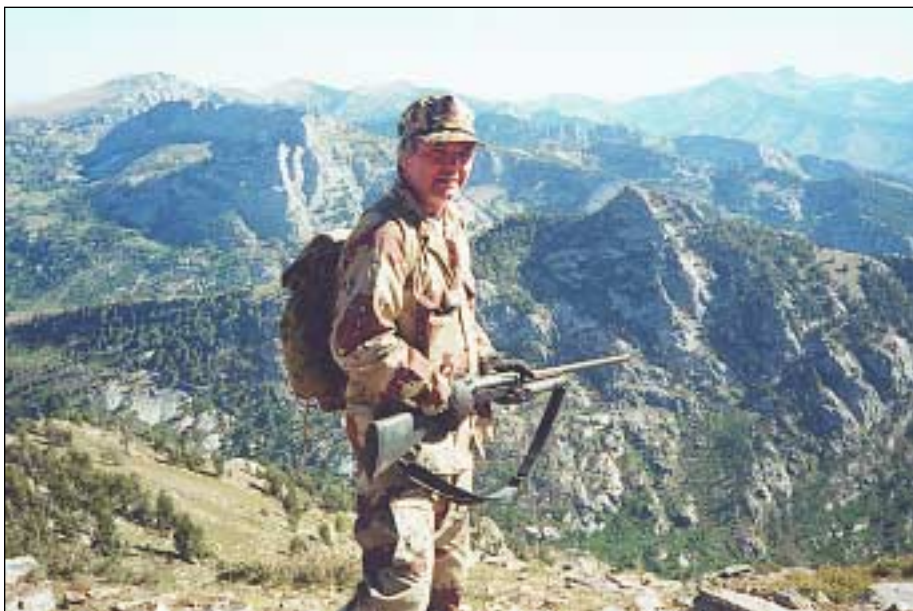


THUNDER

The rarest trophy in North America is a 90 mph rocket that very few people know about so let's keep that secret to ourselves.

By Joel Pat Latham
Photos by author



Tim Hall and his Benelli at the top of the Ruby Range.

I was in Nepal hunting Blue Sheep and was bent over throwing-up my breakfast and heaving violently just to catch a trace of oxygen. A glance at my altimeter showed 14,738 feet above sea level. Seconds later, I was startled by what I thought sounded like the bugling of a sick elk.

"What the thunder was that?" I asked Big Foot, my Nepalese guide.

"Chu-k-ra," he responded using three syllables.

"What kind of chu-k-ra?," I asked.

"Himalayan Ram Chu-k-ra," he answered, and at that moment, a huge cock came from above us flying directly over our heads. He was about 50 yards high and in a mach tuck position, traveling at least 90 mph. The wind passing over his wings made a high pitched whistling noise and before I could focus my eyes properly, he was a half-mile away. It was love at first sight.

The Himalayan Snow Partridge (*Tetraogallus himalayensis*) is dull gray with a smoky white head and collar and is native to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, China, and Kashmir. Males have metatarsal spurs and average four to six pounds, with females averaging a little less. In the United States, these birds live above 9,500 feet on steep cliffs and ridges for easy escape, and they feed on forbs, grasses and sedges mostly on southwest facing slopes. In winter, high winds clear the snow-covered peaks making suitable places for them to survive. They are vocal while feeding, are very wary, and have such keen eyesight that they can usually spot hunters while we have another half day or so of hard climbing.

Fortunately for wing shooters in the United States, in 1963 a Nevada sheep hunter named Hamilton McCaughney helped negotiate with the President of Pakistan to introduce this exciting game bird into Nevada. In 1965, the state of Nevada began raising the birds in pens in Mason Valley, with numerous releases until 1979. The Ruby Mountains and East Humboldts proved to be an ideal habitat and they have proliferated. Hunting began in 1980.

My first snow cock hunt took place with Bill Gibson out of Elko, Nevada in 1991. I used a Browning A5, 12-gauge and many birds were out of range but finally, luck was my companion and I harvested a huge hen with a high house eight shot. The bird slammed into a solid granite rock. It fell 1,000 feet and finally stopped on an inaccessible ledge. Feathers floated and swirled in the wind reminding me of the pillow fights my brother and I had as young boys.

The next day, with the help of my guide, "Ace" Bill Gibson, and 100 feet of rope, we successfully retrieved my trophy. As Ace was dangling helplessly at the end of the rope, he was able to snatch the now tail-less bird from the crevice. He then gathered

feathers for 20 minutes hoping that the taxidermist could salvage the trophy. To qualify to hunt these birds, one should be a little crazy.

ER BIRD

The next year, I extended my range with a Spanish-made Zibola 10-gauge double barrel, 3-1/2 inch, but it weighs almost as much as a .50-caliber machine gun. I had a hard time hauling it up and down the mountain. Again, luck was on my side and I harvested a mature cock as he fed on grasshoppers. I stepped off the distance and it measured 81 yards, proving that a 10-gauge does have range. With that success came the coveted title of "Ace of the Nevada Alps." I had successfully harvested both male and female snow cock. I was treated with great admiration by other well-respected wing shooters and, I felt pretty cocky. I told myself that I was a great shot and in terrific physical condition for a man of my age.

Perhaps I became a little over-confident thinking that this wasn't such a unique bird to harvest. The following year, I was a little shocked when I had to wear the horse collar, the big zero. Two years later, another zero. I was learning that this was the most challenging bird to harvest anywhere and I believe it to be the rarest trophy in North America with only about 170 harvested in the past 19 years.

That last night in snow cock hunting camp, after an unsuccessful hunt, I saw an advertisement for the Benelli Super Black Eagle, 12-gauge, 3 1/2 inch, in a sporting magazine that I was reading. The statistics are very close to the 10-gauge without the punishing weight. Hoping to redeem my position of honor, I decided that I had to own one.

Two weeks after returning home from that fourth hunt, I decided that even though my wife doesn't hunt, she needed a new shotgun and that the Benelli would make a perfect Christmas gift. I did it. I swear I did! Of course, she repaid me the next Christmas when she gave me a top of the line, Bernina sewing machine with all the bells and whistles. From time to time, I allow her to use my sewing machine, and at certain times of the year, she loans me her shotgun. Did I mention that it helps to be a little crazy to hunt these bird?

Snow cock hunting must be something like having a baby. While you're doing it, you swear that if God will just let you get through the ordeal, you'll never do it again. As time passes, you tend to forget the pain and agony of the hunt, just as according to some mothers, the pain of childbirth is soon forgotten.

One day, while admiring my bird collection, my friends, Tim Hall and father and son duo, Dave and Matt Kyle, asked about my favorite hunt, and I dug out the old photos and relived the excitement and exhilaration of the chase. Like those moms who forget the pain of childbirth, I had forgotten the hard climbs up to 11,000 feet, the parched throat, the week-old, sweat-soaked socks and other smelly clothing, the blisters on the balls and heels of both feet, the cracked and bleeding lips, sun-burned face, and the falls that caused gashes on both knee caps. Before I knew it, my friends had talked me into taking them on a self-guided, backpack hunt for snow cocks. I believe in the old saying, "happiness is having something pending." The thrill of the chase raced inside my soul.

Tim and Matt were the most fit. Tim is a former Marine lieutenant who served in Vietnam and is absolutely as tough as a wire knot. He's not a youngster but he still runs four miles in under 30 minutes, five days a week. Matt had the advantage of being only 30 years old and in great condition. Dave and I are in our winter years and must resort to hunting smarter, not harder. I had hoped that I could get my body into relatively good condition but I needed that extra edge and I had a plan to acquire it.

Duck and geese hunters use decoys to lure their prey. To my knowledge, no one has tried to use decoys to hunt Himalayan snow cock. "Why not give it a try?" I thought. There are none available commercially, so I took several photographs of my taxidermy mounts, picked the best two shots and had them blown up to life-size. This was an expensive trial but I couldn't run the risk of having to wear the horse collar again. I glued the photos on 1/8" thick,

smooth hard board, sticking the photographs to both sides, and using a band saw, cut out 20 silhouettes, sending five each to my friends, and naming my personal favorite, Sassy Suzie.

Larry Gilbertson, supervisor of Game Biologists in the Elko office reported that the range of harvested birds per year since 1981 has been from 2 to 23 birds with an average being 9 birds harvested. The findings from helicopter surveys state that there were approximately 217 birds in 1994, 79 birds in 1995, 83 birds in 1996, 73 birds in 1997, and 95 birds in 1998. These numbers are indicative of the effects of the weather, which may have been too dry, too wet, too cold, or too hot. One would be wise to seek advice from these reports before launching a hunting expedition. One of Larry's biologist friends has been hunting for 10 years and just last year harvested his first bird. Larry reported that this hunt is something like chukar hunting except it is much more difficult, extremely physical, and involves much more steep and rugged terrain. Generally, the season is September to the middle of October with the limit being one per day and one in possession.

On a clear day in September, we began our quest. We loaded our 60-pound burdens on our backs and labored up the slopes. It took us nine hours to go about six miles, all the while gaining only approximately 5,000 feet in altitude. We were about a half mile from our intended base camp and not acclimated to this altitude, so we agreed to camp where we stood before we collapsed and were unable to get up. We flatlanders don't do well in the mountains.

The next morning renewed, we awoke before dawn and galloped into Camp Dead Horse where we set up camp and had a hot breakfast. Tim and I raced up the mountain to 10,500 feet where Tim spotted a strutting cock above us just as he spotted us. The cock gave the alarm call and of course, dove into the canyon and glided across to the adjacent cliffs a mile away. There he gave what I call a smart aleck cackle as he

THUNDER BIRD



ABOVE: Tim Hall with the trophies and the decoys.

BELOW: The author with his trophy Himalayan snow cock.



landed. We had missed a perfect opportunity to get off a shot. Our hearts sank to rock bottom. We sat down, put our faces in our hands, and gasped for what little oxygen was available, which is 30 percent less than what we are accustomed.

About 10 minutes later, we simultaneously heard the feeding clucks of birds above us. Finally, through our binoculars, we saw a flock of 13 cocks and hens. We patiently waited in hiding until they grazed out of sight over the top. We weighed our options and made a battle plan. Another 15 minutes passed and we launched our attack. Picture Tim and me with our twin Benellis at port arms as we eased over the ridge. Now imagine our surprise when our eyes met with the eyes of the flock of snow cock just on the other side of that ridge. Instantly, the mountain peak erupted with the sounds of their flight.

I got off a snap shot, but a full choke at five yards doesn't deliver much of a pattern and the flock chattered defiantly. While in formation, they glided downward and away, away, and away, and literally out of my ability to focus in just a matter of a few seconds. We had muffed the opportunity of a lifetime. One never gets that close to a flock of snow cocks.

My four decades of quail hunting had programmed me to raise the muzzle as the covey rises, shoulder my piece and slap the trigger. In this rise, the birds launch down and away while I'm raising the muzzle. If I get another opportunity, I must remember to fight ingrained instincts and lower the muzzle. It's frustrating, and it happens in the blink of an eye.

The next morning, we were awakened at dawn by the chattering of snow cocks from the cliffs above. Our bodies and minds rejuvenated and refreshed after a good night's sleep, we climbed for about two hours before reaching a beautiful alpine meadow and sat down for a rest. Suddenly, we heard snow cock chattering in a box canyon behind us. I thought there was no way for them to escape us. Staying out of sight, Tim would go right and I would go left. When they launched, they would have to fly directly over one of us. Ah ha! We had them for sure. Again, I learned a valuable lesson. Those birds vanished without a trace. They must have sneaked out over the top of the canyon as we made our stalk.

About noon, we topped out on a mesa and moved toward the southwestern-facing feeding area. Suddenly, I motioned for Tim to freeze, pointing to a sleeping Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep about 40

yards in front. I whispered to him not to make eye contact, nor to act like a predator by threatening them in any way. We slowly, cautiously made our way toward them. I took photographs as we strolled into the herd of 11 ewes and four lambs. To my absolute wonder, we got within 10 feet of a sleeping beauty when she awoke and joined the others only to stand 30 yards away looking back at us. They did not seem to be disturbed at all—actually, they seemed more curious than alarmed.

We quietly angled away about 50 yards when I realized that this was an unprecedented opportunity. Quietly, I told Tim to slowly put out his five decoys as I did mine. We would use this herd of sheep as live confidence decoys. Much like duck hunters use blue herring as confidence decoys.

We lay down and put our facemasks on. The sun warmed our exhausted bodies, our eyelids soon grew heavy and we quickly dozed off. This refreshing catnap was interrupted by the sounds of the herd of sheep as they grazed just 10 yards away.

Tim whispered, "Look at this." A female lamb was just five yards away and seemed to want to come closer. It was very clear to me that because of the remoteness, these sheep had never seen men before. Even if I didn't harvest a snow cock this year, I considered this outing a tremendous success. I love wild sheep and sheep hunting almost as much as I love my wife of 39 years. In my 20 years of sheep hunting in eight countries, harvesting 17 wild sheep, I was now seeing the rules broken. I've been to a wild goat-roping contest, a wild horse milking contest—I've even seen the King and Queen of England, but this was something entirely new. Wild sheep normally don't get this close to humans.

A few minutes later, as I watched through my binoculars, a golden eagle began an attack on a snow cock across the canyon. Able to leap buildings in a single bound, the rooster flew to a negative cliff face, hanging on upside down with one foot as he vigorously batted at the eagle with the other. The rooster averted the attack and the eagle broke off the aggression and flew out of sight. The cock released his upside down grip and suddenly I realized he was coming directly at me faster than a speeding bullet and appearing five times larger than normal. It seemed that Sassy Suzie and her nine decoy sisters had caught his eye.

Wittedly, Tim said, "Look up in the sky. It's a plane. No, it's Super Bird!"

Within seconds there were five more cocks joining the flight in our direc-

tion. My mind raced as I tried to prepare myself. Tim whispered, with a slow Texas drawl, "Steady lads!" I knew he had the answer. I had to remain calm, perfectly still, and remember the lesson we learned yesterday. The birds cupped their wings at 70 yards, and instantly they were in our faces. "Take 'em," I yelled and we raised up from our prone positions. I took the big cock on the right and Tim had his on the left.

Confident that we had two cocks stone dead, we quietly laid back down on our backs to see what effect this commotion had on the bighorns. We were concerned that we had taken advantage of their curiosity and tameness. In spite of the pandemonium and within two minutes of their silent paradise erupting with gunshots, they were grazing sheepishly away. Gathering our composure, we sat up and gave each other high fives with both hands.

As we were admiring our bird's breast markings, wings, and heads, we discovered that two roosters were indeed hens. There was not a trace of a metatarsal spur. The birds were so large that we had only presumed we were harvesting roosters. An empty Benelli weighs six pounds and these hens were about a pound heavier. My game biologist friends would be delighted to hear that we had taken such enormous, healthy birds.

This hunt has been like a sheep hunt without the astronomical price tag, and like a turkey hunt with an elevated altitude. After a quick photo shoot and a drink of water from our canteens, we hoisted our day-packs onto our backs for the three-hour descent, which seemed like a stroll in the park because everything about this bird is a wing shooter's dream come true. At Camp Dead Horse, we were greeted by a grinning Dave and Matt. They had taken two fine cocks and Matt also proudly displayed another colorful catch of trout. We began to salivate just thinking of the fine feast we would have on this evening of celebration.

The breast of the snow cock is white meat and very delicious when fried in a sauce of butter and garlic and topped with sliced blanched almonds. Well, actually, I guess nothing tastes bad when cooked over glowing embers in an alpine meadow next to a clear, blue lake with trout rising to the surface. As the sun set that evening, we quietly watched as a mule deer doe and fawn played and fed peacefully in the willows below. The stream babbled as it struggled to reach the low country and our spirits soared as we realized that we had traded a day of our lives for this unforgettable experience. ■

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