

# *Lagopus muta helvetica* (Thienemann, 1829)

Rock Ptarmigan

Family: Phasianidae

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This species is characterised by a **completely white winter plumage**, except for the tail feathers, which remain black; in the summer, on the other hand, the male takes on a brown-grey colouring, while the female is a russet colour. The male can also be recognised by a darker streak running from the beak to the eye, and a pronounced red wattle over the eye.

It lives above the tree line, in grasslands with dwarf trees, stones and rocks, rising as far as the snow line or icebergs in late summer, even over 3,000 m. In these environments, where the snow lasts longer, it has developed a **survival technique** which makes it difficult if not impossible to see for predators. Thanks to its **seasonal dimorphism**, in the autumn it changes colour to become white like the snow,



(Photo Mike Lane, Fotolia)

allowing it to camouflage itself in an open environment that otherwise offers little refuge. A further adaptation to the environment is its **feathered feet**, insulated from the cold and spreading its weight when moving on the snow.

**In the spring, the males become territorial**, performing courting flights and singing to attract females. After the eggs hatch, the males usually abandon the females, who continue to care for the chicks, taking them to feeding grounds, keeping them warm and protecting them until late autumn, when families group together to pass the winter.

Bio-Montagne - Réseau d'éducation sur la biodiversité dans les zones alpines - Programma di cooperazione transfrontaliera Italia-Svizzera 2007-2013

