**Rock Ptarmigans**

The Japanese rock ptarmigan (*Lagopus muta japonica*) is the prefectural bird of Gifu and Nagano Prefectures and an iconic species of the Japanese Alps. The Japanese name, *raichō*, means “thunder bird,” and comes from its tendency to emerge in bad weather when predators are less likely to be present. The birds live on alpine mountaintops and thrive among the Siberian dwarf pines of Mt. Norikura (3,026 m).

Camouflage is a key survival strategy for rock ptarmigans. Their plumage is mottled brown in summer and turns pure white in winter, hiding them from foxes, crows, martens, and other predators. The species is endangered, partly because their populations are limited to high altitudes—mountaintops where deep snows and limited vegetation still mimic the ice-age climate in which the ptarmigans evolved.

The birds are not afraid of humans, and are most active in the hours after sunrise and before sunset. Their favorite habitat is beneath the thick shelter of dwarf pines. One can tell they are near by their calls: a frog-like croaking in the case of a territorial male, a gentle “coo coo” from a female. Their droppings look quite different from those of other birds, resembling the brown, wormlike catkins dropped by pine trees. Brighter-colored droppings are fresh, a sign that a ptarmigan may still be nearby.

If you spot a rock ptarmigan, be sure to watch quietly, stay at least 5 meters away, and leave if you sense it is stressed. Be especially sensitive during the spring mating season. To protect their alpine environment, stay on the clearly marked paths, use designated toilets, do not pick plants, and do not leave garbage, which may attract predators.

Crouching calmly and quietly near ground level will improve your chances of glimpsing this fascinating creature. Ask hotel or bus terminal staff for up-to-date information on where best to search.