

Bird Symbols of Canada

Part 13

Nunavut

Provincial Birds: Rock Ptarmigan (*Lagopus mutus*)

Nunavut has adopted the Rock Ptarmigan as its Official Territorial bird, as is explicitly stated on the website of the Nunavut Legislative Assembly. The Assembly provides helpful background on the Rock Ptarmigan, including:

*“While most other birds migrate south in the early fall, the **Rock Ptarmigan** (*Lagopus Muta*) is truly an arctic bird, living in Nunavut throughout the year. Called *Aqiggiq* in Inuktitut, the rock ptarmigan is found throughout the circumpolar world, earning a place in the art, folklore and diet of indigenous peoples.*

Distinct from most other birds with its three variations of plumage instead of the usual two, the rock ptarmigan faces its biggest challenge to survival in the winter, when snow and wind conditions make food and shelter hard to find.”¹

The Official Photograph of the Rock Ptarmigan from the “Official Symbols Gallery” of the Legislative Assembly website is included below:



Image source: <https://www.assembly.nu.ca/about-legislative-assembly/photo-gallery>

The photograph is from the Official Symbols Gallery of the Nunavut Legislative Assembly website.

¹ <https://www.assembly.nu.ca/about-legislative-assembly/official-bird-nunavut>

eBird Canada has the following to say about the Rock Ptarmigan, in particular focusing on the staged evolution of the plumage as the seasons change:

“Plumage changes strikingly throughout the year. In winter, both sexes are pure white with black outer tail feathers. As summer progresses, male develops cold grayish-brown feathers on head, neck, and back; generally, quite splotchy looking. Summer female is paler golden-brown with intricate black and white markings.”²

eBird also states that in winter, the male Rock Ptarmigan has a distinctive black eyeline, which helps distinguish this bird from the Willow Ptarmigan which doesn't share this winter feature.

As regards the range of the Rock Ptarmigan, eBird shows that it can be found in northern parts of North America, from Alaska, Yukon, the Northwest Territory as well as Nunavut, then across to Newfoundland and Labrador. Outside North America, the Rock Ptarmigan is present in Greenland, Iceland, Scotland, Norway, Sweden and Finland, with outposts in Russia.

Canada Post has issued a couple of stamps that mark the Rock Ptarmigan. The first of these was in 2001, as part of a set of four “Birds of Canada”:

2001 Canada – Birds of Canada



Image source: www.bird-stamps.org

Canada Post also made this stamp available in self-adhesive format, as part of a booklet.

The second stamp comes from the 2016 mini-sheet.

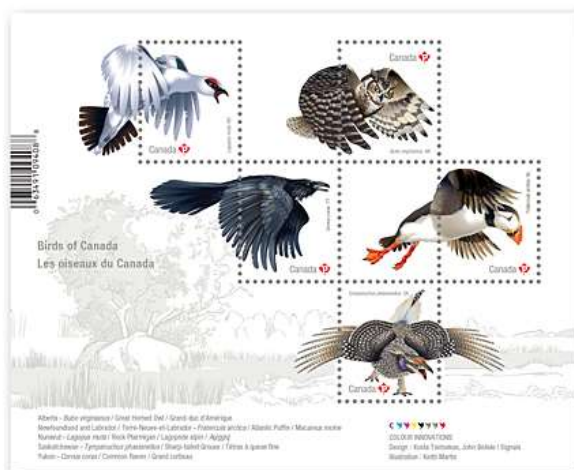


Image source: <https://www.canadapost.ca/>

² <https://ebird.org/species/rocpta1>

The mini-sheet stamp is especially interesting, in that it does show the Rock Ptarmigan in a striking flight pose, perhaps defending its territory. As mentioned elsewhere in this series of articles, the mini-sheet was the result of team work by designer Kosta Tsetsekas and illustrator Keith Martin.

Whilst the Rock Ptarmigan is associated with Arctic conditions as its basic habitat, it does face challenges in winter to survive, both from the snow and wind, which make both shelter and food hard to find. The Nunavut Assembly website states:

“Camouflaged by its white winter plumage, the rock ptarmigan uses its long black claws to scratch through the snow to reach buried vegetation such as the low-lying purple saxifrage.

A rock ptarmigan's feet are feathered right down to the toes, keeping it warm, and acting as a pair of feathery snowshoes to prevent the bird from sinking into the snow. And, in the deep of winter, the ptarmigan will use snow as a shelter, burrowing deep to escape the bitter wind and indigenous predators such as the fox and marten. Adaptations such as these have earned the rock ptarmigan its place as an Arctic symbol-and as the official bird of Nunavut.”³

The Canadian Wildlife Federation’s “Who’s Who” explains that, as regards habitat, the Rock Ptarmigan lives at higher elevations and latitudes, where their typical habitat is rather dry and supports sparse, very low vegetation. In the southern and western parts of their North American range, it also frequents low-shrub vegetation⁴.

The diet of the Rock Ptarmigan is essentially based on plant materials, including shoots, berries, leaves and seeds, of tundra plants.

There are a number of other postal authorities that have produced stamps that feature the Rock Ptarmigan. Most of these are from countries where you might reasonably expect to find the Rock Ptarmigan. These include the following:

1965 Iceland - Rock Ptarmigan (Charity Stamp)



³ <https://www.assembly.nu.ca/about-legislative-assembly/official-bird-nunavut>

⁴ <https://hww.ca/en/wildlife/birds/ptarmigan.html>

These two Icelandic stamps (Image source: www.stampworld.com) feature a female Rock Ptarmigan (both summer and winter) and were issued in a quantity of 300,000 for each stamp.

2009 Sweden - Snow White Animals



Image source: www.stampworld.com

This Swedish stamp comes from a set of three, which also feature a stoat and a mountain hare.

I like the artwork by engraver Piotr Naszarkowski, who has succeeded in conveying the sense that the Rock Ptarmigan is moving, albeit slowly and tentatively, towards the background foliage.

2013 Italy – Birds of the Alps



Image source: www.stampworld.com

I have included this stamp from Italy, which forms part of a set of five bird stamps. There are two reasons I picked this one: first, it does show a Rock Ptarmigan in flight, albeit in the background; and second, Italy is something of a “bird stamp” desert, with very few issues in modern times.

2019 Andorra – EUROPA National Birds



Image source: www.stampworld.com

This stamp from Andorra (French Post) was issued in a quantity of 60,000. I like the engraved artwork on this stamp, even if it does not show the Rock Ptarmigans in passive mode. The design does have the virtue of showing a pair, rather than just the male bird.

2020 Iceland – Christmas/Winter Stamps



Image source: <https://stamps.postur.is/>

I have included this Rock Ptarmigan stamp from Iceland Post (from a set of two, the other shows a fox in winter camouflage) because this is likely to be one of the very last commemorative stamps to be issued by Iceland Post, following their decision to end production of such stamps.