

SCOTT'S NATURAL HISTORY

The common snipe is far from a commonplace bird. Its unpredictable habits and flight pattern and its haunting sound make it a quarry to be relished.
By Johnny Scott



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THIS MONTH, with its imperceptibly lengthening days, is a strange, unsettling time, more burdened with myths and folklore than any other. In farming circles, great significance is still attached to the weather on Candlemas day, 2 February. A fair start – if a badger can see its shadow – means there is more winter ahead than behind. The Saxons called February, “Sprote-cal” (sprout kale), and below us in the valley there are the first signs of growth; a faint green haze of buds on alder, hazel and willow, with wild garlic and aconites pushing through along the river-banks. In the hills, the first harbinger of spring is often the eerie melody of a cock snipe, announcing his arrival by performing a territorial display flight.

This hauntingly lovely sound puzzled naturalists for several centuries. One school of thought believed it was vocal. The other maintained it was produced by motion of the wings. The matter was not resolved until the Fifties, when Sir P Manson-Bahr, RA Carr-Lewty and the then Editor of *The Field*, Eric Parker, proved under laboratory conditions that “drumming” is created by the two extended primary tail feathers vibrating in the air stream at a certain speed. The beautiful humming, which rises to a fluting crescendo, becomes audible when snipe, diving from a considerable height at an angle of 45 degrees, reach a speed between 25mph and 45mph. It only lasts for a few seconds and has extraordinary carrying and ventriloquial properties with the bird, disconcertingly, always some distance from where the noise is heard.

The soft bleating or whinnying which has given snipe a variety of colloquial names – “heather beater”, “horse gowk” and “mire kid” – seems to serve a number of purposes. It declares the cock bird’s territorial boundaries and announces his presence to hens. Once one has been attracted, it forms part of the courtship display. During nesting, I believe the ventriloquial effect is used to distract predators.

Cock birds arrive from low-lying marshes and wet fields at their moorland breeding grounds towards the end of February, the hens a week or two later. The main period of drumming activity is during mating and nesting, from mid March until the beginning of July. Only the cocks drum, and courtship is a wonderful exhibition of aerobatics as the birds chase each other or preen and posture on the ground with tail feathers erect and spread like a blackcock’s. Apart from their harsh scraping alarm call when disturbed,

mating is the only other occasion when they become vocal, uttering soft eager cheeps.

The nest is a well-hidden, shallow scrape lined with dry grass in which the hen lays an average of four eggs, greenish with brown blotches. Incubation lasts about three weeks and while the hen sits the cock stays in the vicinity, displaying from time to time. The eggs hatch over a period of 36 hours and the first couple of chicks, which are active within a very short time, are hurried away by the cock to a nearby place of safety to protect the nest from predators. Both parents feed the young, which can fly at three weeks and feed themselves by the time they are a month or five weeks old. Snipe remain in the uplands until the first frosts drive them to lower

Common snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*)

Description Weight 6oz. Length 10in to 12in. Striped head and variegated plumage of browns and yellow.

Diet Worms, beetles, caddis fly larvae, grubs, water snails, marsh plant seeds.

Breeding The cock “drums” to establish breeding territory and attract a hen. The hen lays four olive-green eggs heavily marked with dark splotches in shallow nest. The incubation period is about 21 days.

Habitat Marshes and damp inland places.

Distribution North and central Eurasia. Africa. North and South America. Snipe migrate south in winter.

ground. Their season is from 12 August until 31 January and the first snipe shot are often on grouse moors.

Common snipe, *Gallinago gallinago*, are mysterious little creatures of bogs and damp empty spaces, of mists, water margins and rushes. The term for a group in flight, a wisp, is descriptive; seen briefly above a reed bed, they soon melt away into a grey winter sky. A number on the ground is called a walk. Their striped plumage, the varying shades of yellow and brown and long green legs are all the autumn colours of their marsh and estuary feeding grounds. They weigh no more than 6oz and measure 10in to 12in, of which a quarter is beak. This long proboscis with its pliable tip that enables them to locate their diet of worms, larvae and water snails, was once thought to be the means by which they launched themselves into the air.

Where suitable conditions prevail, snipe have an extensive distribution: north and central Eurasia from Iceland to the Bering Strait; most of Africa outside desert regions; and North and South America. Some of the finest shooting is in the rice fields of Carolina and the coastal swamps of Louisiana. Britain has a breeding population of around 70,000 augmented from August onwards of migrants moving south from Iceland, the Baltic and northern Europe when the ground becomes too hard for their beak tips to penetrate. Large numbers often appear with the September and October moons along west coast estuaries and in Northern Ireland before dispersing in search of suitable habitat.

The ideal wintering conditions are a combination of moist, frost-free soil and mud containing their food sources; some adjacent cover as protection from strong winds and predators; a bit of open water, which need be no more than the damp corner of a field where a blocked drain has flooded; and freedom from disturbance. Enormous areas of snipe habitat have been lost, but the presence or absence of birds in any particular area is entirely dependent on their capricious response to the weather.

Apart from hard frost, which will drive snipe from their damp inland haunts back to the coast, their movement is governed by laws about which we know little or nothing. In some weather conditions they lie so tight you can practically tread on them, in others they consistently spring and jink away just out of range. In one season there will be any number at a marsh; the next year not one will visit. I was down at the Solway in late October on a day of blustery wind and heavy showers with wisps of snipe everywhere. The following day they had all disappeared.

Snipe are wonderful converters of food and one shot in November, when they are feeding hard, will be a delicious little ball of fat. Like all game, its flavour seems to be enhanced in proportion to the effort expended. Shooting snipe is so utterly unpredictable and different from any other sport that it acquires a perverse charm all of its own, which easily becomes addictive. Perhaps the greatest snipe-shot of all time was an American, JJ Pringle, who abandoned a career in the US navy to devote 20 years to the pursuit of snipe through the bogs of Louisiana. Between 1867 and 1887 he claimed 78,602, before retiring to write what is still considered to be the definitive work on the subject, *Twenty Years’ Snipe Shooting*. ■