

Wilson's Snipe *Gallinago delicata*



Folk Name: Chuweeka, Jack Snipe

Status: Migrant, Winter Resident

Abundance: Uncommon

Habitat: Damp places, short-grass marsh, mudflats, margins of ponds

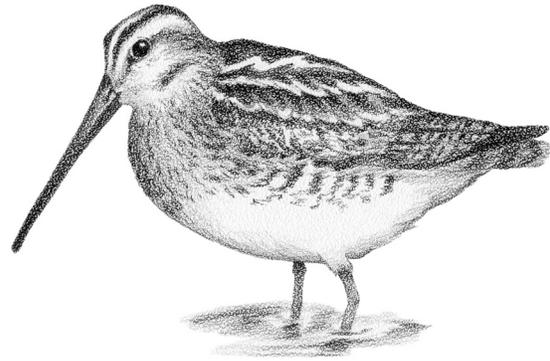
The Wilson's Snipe is one of the most widespread shorebirds in America. It breeds in our far northern states and northward into Arctic Canada. It winters in the lower 48 states. The Snipe is a 10-½-inch-long, plump sandpiper with short legs, a striped head, and a rusty tail. Snipe prefer wet meadows, marshy areas, and “burnt-over lowground” habitats, where they remain well concealed while they use their long bill to probe for worms. They are crepuscular in nature—most active at dawn and dusk. They are known to stand fast as a person approaches, and some have been known not to flush even when they were stepped on.

Wilson's Snipe are most often found in the Central Carolinas between September and mid-May. We have no reports from June or July and only two from August. One was reported on August 15, 1996, in Rowan County, and one was found in Anson County on August 23, 2015. Most flocks encountered number fewer than 15 birds. Ron Clark and Tom Ledford reported the largest group of snipe ever seen in the region. They found the birds along a wet ditch beside a field of corn stubble at Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge on December 28, 2015. Ron Clark wrote:

We continued walking and snipe flew up from everywhere. They soon gathered in five groups and flew around the field about 100 feet up. Tom counted 70 in the largest group. I got 38 and 25 in two smaller ones. There were two more groups about that size. There were easily 30+ in each. 10–12 more were flying up from in front of us. The most I've ever seen was in the low 20s, also at a Pee Dee count a few years ago. Today was amazing and not something I even thought possible.

Wilson's Snipe are a prized game bird and snipe hunting is a venerable and time-honored tradition in this part of the South. This includes both the truly challenging hunt that involves quick reflexes, guns, mud, and occasionally dogs, as well as the somewhat less challenging “ancient and royal game” of the snipe hunt, where no one wants to be the person “left holding the bag.”

There are multiple accounts of the latter type of snipe hunts inflicted upon unsuspecting victims in this region over the past century-and-a-half. One account from



Monroe on June 5, 1878, tells how this traditional “snipe hunt” is carried out:

Three of our young townsmen sportive in their natures and particularly fond of hunting, prevailed upon one of our prominent citizens—who, by the way, is editor of one of our weekly journals—to join them in a snipe hunt. After going some two or three miles from town they came to an old swampy thicket, at which place, by the side of a branch, the editor, as per agreement, was stationed, with bag in hand, to await the coming of the snipes, while the other three, as per agreement, went off to drive them up to the place where the editor was stationed, with a heart palpitating with anxiety, with a bent back and an open bag, ready to receive the representatives of the feathery tribe.

Of course the three who went off to drive



Wilson's Snipe. (Jeff Lemons)

immediately returned to town.

The editor, in the attitude as aforesaid, and bag in hand, as aforesaid, waited until after midnight, up to which time the stillness of the night had not been interrupted by the arrival of the snipes or the snipe drivers. By this time the bag holder “smelt a mice”; he saw the point of the joke. Alone he wended his way home, where he arrived in the “wee hours” of the night, a sadder, madder, and it is to be hoped, a wiser man than before he went “snipe hunting.” I guess he will long remember that snipe hunt.

Excerpts from a few other accounts come from Salisbury in February 1884: “The spirit of American youth is vigorous here, and it is the fate of a very fresh juryman, attending court here, to fall into their hands. They went snipe hunting, and the juryman preferred holding the bag while the boys drove the birds.”

From Charlotte in June 1903: “Because Mr. Wightman was a stranger [to this hunting area], it was decided that he should hold the bag. Mr. Wightman was very grateful indeed, and said so half a dozen times as he trudged out beyond the Country Club.”

From Kannapolis in January 1968:

The only previous association many of us have had with snipe are the legendary “snipe hunts” that are the modern day answer to the Indian manhood tests of another era. There are many adults today who snicker at the mention of the snipe hunts, when their friends took them to a darkened area beside a bubbling brook and then, while the others were to go upstream to scare the snipe downstream, the newcomer had to hold the sack. The others would go noisily upstream and there the newcomer stood holding the sack...and holding the sack... and holding the sack.

In reality, true snipe hunting is a difficult challenge indeed. Hunters search out snipe in cold, wet marshy habitats, quickly fire when their prey is flushed, and use trained dogs to retrieve the downed birds. One expert sportsman shared a very detailed “how to” account of real snipe hunting that was published in the April 2, 1911, edition of *The Charlotte Observer*:

Snipe shooting generally is best pursued on mildly windy days and the gunner’s companion should be a steady pointer or setter thoroughly used to the work. It is immaterial which is employed as long as the dog acknowledges snipe well. No better sized shot can be used than No. 8, one ounce to the charge for a twelve bore. Some sportsmen use smaller sizes, but it is a mistake. Snipe will very often carry off sparrowhail to a considerable distance or entirely escape vital injury. ...The whole matter is over in four seconds at most. Should the first barrel miss there will be no other opportunity for another delivery, for a snipe on the report will dart upward with amazing swiftness and then begin its strange evolutions, termed twisting by one writer. In these perplexing gyrations a snipe does not merely incline to one side, now the other, showing the white inside the wing feathers, but dodges in the form of a corkscrew.

Recipes for preparing snipe were included in most early Southern cook books. Dr. J.B. Alexander commented on the Wilson’s Snipe in Mecklenburg County at the turn of the twentieth century: “The snipe is a swamp bird, have never been plentiful, is said to be very good for the table, but have always been scarce and difficult to take. ...The snipe of which we have written has quite a reputation for the table, is relished by the epicures, and not the snipe that is frequently brought into play to introduce young men into the art of ‘hunting snipe.’ ”