

Searching for Snipe

Thought by many to be a fictional creature, Wilson's snipe is actually a common—though extraordinary—shorebird found across the state. By Ellen Horowitz



SINKING FEELING A Currier and Ives print from 1880 humorously depicts the joy of hunting snipe in the mucky, bug-infested marshes where the small shorebirds live.



While my husband and I were visiting old friends at their farm near Whitefish one early June evening, I occasionally heard a hollow, whistling sound from varying locations high in the sky. As I craned my neck to find the source of the peculiar melody, our friend Walt asked what I was looking for.

“Snipe. Do you hear that sound?”

He nodded.

“Don’t you just love that snipe music?” I assumed that, as an avid bird hunter, he

already knew about snipe, so my next question came with honest intent.

“Have you ever gone snipe hunting?”

“You mean with a flashlight and brown paper bag?”

“Very funny. I’m serious. Montana has a snipe hunting season.”

Walt’s skepticism changed when his wife, Mary Jane, handed him a field guide to birds, open to a page with a picture and description of Wilson’s snipe, *Gallinago delicata*.

“Well, I’ll be. I’ve heard that sound my whole life and never knew what it was.”

No other bird requires as many explana-

tions as the snipe. It’s best known as a fictitious creature invented for playing a practical joke on kids and others new to the outdoors. The real snipe is known by very few people. And no wonder. It’s a secretive, mostly solitary shorebird rarely recognized except by those who know its wet habitat and mystical music.

Bleating goats in the sky

The snipe’s quavering tune, known as winnowing, is the fabled bird’s most distinguishing—and mysterious—characteristic. The melody is an eerie *hu-hu-hu-hu-hu-hu-*

hu-hu that sounds unlike any other bird you’ve ever heard. Adding to its otherworldly aura, the snipe typically begins its haunting tune around twilight as it flies high in the darkening sky, virtually invisible.

For centuries people mistook the snipe for a mythical creature. Farmers in northern Germany believed the supernatural sound came from a team of bleating goats pulling a chariot across the sky. Swedes attributed snipe winnowing to a whinnying horse in heaven. Fishermen in early day New England associated the timing of snipe music with the upstream spawning runs of shad. They believed the tremulous tunes came from the shad spirit. In the mid-1800s, author and naturalist Henry David Thoreau described the bird’s call as a “peculiar spirit-suggesting sound.”

Even naturalists who approached the bird from a scientific perspective long struggled to explain the source of the sound. Was it vocal? Was it made by the snipe’s wings or tail feathers—or both? For more than half a century they debated and conducted experiments to determine the sound’s origin. The answer came in 1907, when Sir Philip Manson-Bahr, an English physician and zoologist, examined the snipe’s outer tail feathers under a microscope.

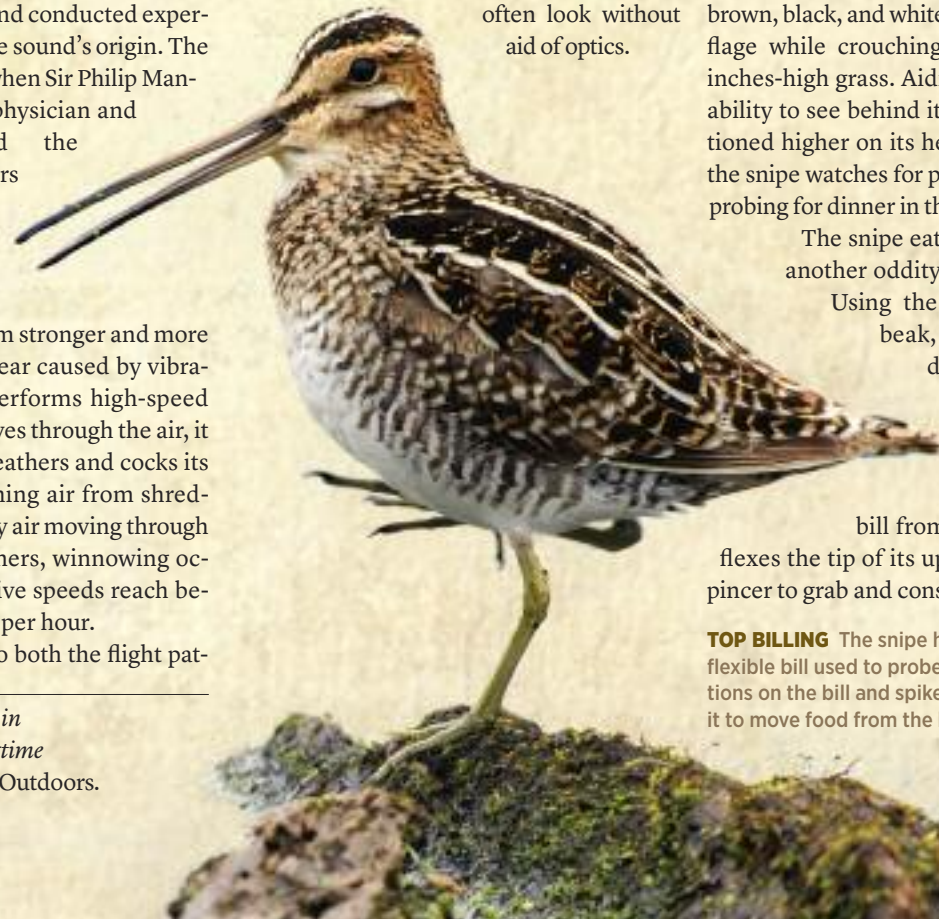
The magnified view revealed extra barbules (hooks) on the feathers that make them stronger and more resistant to wear and tear caused by vibrations when the bird performs high-speed dives. When a snipe dives through the air, it splay its outside tail feathers and cocks its wings to keep the rushing air from shredding the tail. Created by air moving through the wing and tail feathers, winnowing occurs when the bird’s dive speeds reach between 25 and 50 miles per hour.

Winnowing refers to both the flight pat-

tern and the resulting sound. Both male and female snipe winnow, but males do so much more frequently. The behavior serves as a territorial defense that warns off other males while attracting the attention of females. The displays sometimes include aerial acrobatics such as bursts of upside-down flight.

I hear the first winnowing of spring in early April, and snipe music fills the air in May and June. The sound carries far, but it’s surprisingly difficult to pinpoint where in the sky it comes from. The snipe, a robin-sized bird, looks incredibly tiny as it flies 100 yards or more above the ground. It’s also a rapid flyer. I might hear the first bleating high to my left. By the time I glance in that direction, the sound beckons to my right. I rubberneck again only to hear the winnowing transmit from another location. Eventually I find the snipe and track its wide circular flight path and roller-coaster plunges.

It takes practice to locate the speedy speck of a high-flying snipe through binoculars. I often look without aid of optics.



During the breeding season, snipe music typically occurs at dawn and dusk with two notable exceptions. On clear moonlit nights, the snipe bleats all night long. And when the barometric pressure drops drastically, it sometimes winnows throughout the day.

Split-custody parents

After selecting a male’s territory and mating, the female prepares a simple grass-lined nest on the ground near a shallow marsh or wet meadow. For 18 to 20 days, she incubates four speckled, brown-and-olive eggs. The male plays no part in incubation, but several days before the eggs hatch he ends his aerial antics and prepares for parental duties. He listens for the peeps of his soon-to-appear offspring and then, within hours of hatching, he guides two chicks away from their mother. Each parent broods and feeds its well-camouflaged youngsters in a unique split-custody arrangement that’s believed to reduce predation.

The snipe relies on its mottled and striped brown, black, and white plumage for camouflage while crouching motionless among inches-high grass. Aiding its survival is the ability to see behind itself. With eyes positioned higher on its head than most birds, the snipe watches for predators above while probing for dinner in the mucky soils below.

The snipe eats with its bill closed, another oddity of this strange bird.

Using the sensitive tip of its beak, it pokes and probes

dark ooze for insect

larvae, earthworms,

beetles, and small

crustaceans. With-

out removing its

bill from the mud, the snipe

flexes the tip of its upper mandible like a pincer to grab and consume food.

TOP BILLING The snipe has a long, sensitive, flexible bill used to probe soil for food. Serrations on the bill and spikes on the tongue help it to move food from the bill-tip to the throat.

LEFT TO RIGHT: PUBLISHED BY CURRIER & IVES, C. 1880. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; KEN ARCHER

Real snipe hunting

In 1861, John James Audubon described the snipe's diet and credited the bird's choice of foods for providing the "richness of flavor and tenderness for which [the snipe] is so deservedly renowned." In his book, *Life Histories of North American Shorebirds*, Arthur Cleveland Bent wrote, "Probably more snipe have been killed by sportsmen than any other game birds." In the United States, snipe hunting remained a popular sport into the early 20th century.

The term "sniper" originated in the late 1700s and referred to British soldiers in India who hunted snipe for food. The sniper's ability to hit a small zigzagging target that reached speeds of up to 60 miles per hour required extraordinary skill. "Sniper" later became a term for military marksmen who could kill enemy soldiers at a long distance.

Eventually, concern over declining snipe populations in the United States led to hunting regulations. By 1941, the federal government placed a 13-year moratorium



CRACK SHOTS Left: The term "sniper" originally referred to 18th-century British soldiers in India who could hit a tiny, zigzagging snipe in flight. Later it became a term for military marksmen who could kill enemy soldiers at a long distance. Above: A snipe displays its tail plumage.

on snipe hunting. When the season reopened in 1954, the tradition was mostly lost to the next generation of hunters. In Montana, a fall snipe hunting season exists, but few people pursue the lightning-fast birds, according to Jim Hansen, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' Central Flyway migratory bird coordinator in Billings. Despite the snipe's widespread abundance, says Hansen, only a few hundred hunters pursue the bird in Montana each year, harvesting an average

of about one bird each.

Snipe hunting today is rare elsewhere in the United States, too, though many upland bird hunters, often employing pointing dogs, still pursue the closely related woodcock in Midwestern and Eastern hardwood forests. Snipe hunting remains popular among some hunters in Europe.

Left holding the bag

The "snipe hunt" as a form of prank or practical joke dates to the mid-19th century and

continues to be played. It's often used as a rite of passage at summer camps and with Boy Scout troops. Snipe hunters are often left alone outside at night and told to wait quietly or make strange noises to attract the "snipe"—sometimes described as a small, furry creature like a squirrel or tiny deer. The others promise to chase the creatures toward the newcomer. But instead, they return home or to camp, leaving the victim alone in the dark until they realize they have been tricked and "left holding the bag."

Kids aren't the only ones gullible enough to fall for the ruse. In 2009, a small-town Pennsylvania newspaper told the story of a local sportsmen's club that convinced two new adult members to stand in the woods holding paper bags and flashlights for hours while snipe were supposedly herded their way.

Snipe aren't likely to lose their legendary

HEAVENLY GOATS? Right: Because people could not discern the source of the snipe's eerie winnowing sound—later found to emanate from air moving through its spread tail feathers and wings—the bird was for centuries considered a mythical creature, such as a heavenly goat or horse. Below right: An adult female moves through marsh muck with chicks.

status any time soon. For most people, a snipe hunt will remain a prank played on the unsuspecting. But the real joke is on those who refuse to believe that the authentic snipe, a bird with musical tail feathers, actually exists. 🐘

TINNIES Right: Stamped from sheets of tin and designed for portability, snipe decoys were sold in packs of a dozen each beginning in the late 1870s. Hunters would fold each "tinny" in half and mount it on a stick to attract live snipe to their blinds.



DUPED Above: These good-natured newcomers to the Pequea Valley Sportsmen Association, in Pennsylvania, fell for a snipe "hunt" hook, line, and sinker. Left: Vintage shotgun shell box with snipe loads.

Finding snipe in spring and fall

Wilson's snipe are found throughout Montana. In early spring, the shorebirds often perch on roadside fenceposts near flooded agricultural fields and pastures and along the edges of marshes and other wetlands. If lucky enough to view one, your first look will probably be a double take. This medium-size shorebird, and member of the sandpiper family, sports a 2½-inch-long bill. The name "snipe" comes from the old English word meaning "snout." Eighteen species of snipe exist worldwide. In North America, Wilson's snipe (formerly called common snipe) is our only representative.

Listen to the call and winnowing of Wilson's snipe through the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's "All About Birds" website at www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Wilsons_snipe/sounds.

Hunters find snipe in September and October in shallow marshes and wet meadows as the birds migrate south to warmer climes for the winter. Though snipe are migratory game birds regulated by seasons and limits, a federal or state "duck stamp" is not required to hunt them.



CLOCKWISE FROM NEAR LEFT: WIKIPEDIA; DONALD M. JONES; THE CHARLESTON MUSEUM; WIKIPEDIA; FRANCIS BERGOUJIST; HUNTER, CREEK; AUDUBON; LANCASTER ONLINE