

[From Winter 2000 - 2001]

Snipe Hunting Anyone?

Contrary to the popular belief of those who have fallen victim to an old summer camp prank of snipe hunting, snipes really do exist. Each year, I know winter is approaching when I spy the first Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) probing in the mud at the edge of the pond in front of the refuge visitor center.

A small plump member of the sandpiper family, a snipe is brown with distinctive white stripes on its head and back and white belly. They look similar to a woodcock, but are less stocky with more stripes and a longer bill. Their eyes are set far back in their head which enables them to see both forward and back. When startled, they take off flying in a rapid zigzag pattern uttering a harsh, nasal *scaip!* They also have the ability to swim and dive, using their feet and wings underwater, to escape from enemies.

Snipes nest in wet meadows and boggy areas from Alaska to New Jersey, and winter farther south. They migrate in tight flocks at night, but scatter during the daytime to feed alone. They are primarily crepuscular, feeding at dusk and dawn, and seem to be more active on cloudy days. They feed by plunging their long bills into mud in search of insects and grubs. The bill is soft and pliable with a hard tip, and full of nerve endings that allow the snipe to smell and feel the movements and scents of various types of prey. When a tasty morsel is discovered, spines at the base of the tongue and backward-projecting serrations on the inside of the upper mandible work the food up through the long bill and into the gullet.

Like the woodcock, the snipe also has a spectacular territorial flight over its breeding and nesting grounds. Early in the breeding season, both females and males can be seen performing their aerial courtship with much bleating and whinnying. During the flight, an eerie whistling sound, produced by air passing through and vibrating the outer tail feathers can be heard for over half a mile.

The only snipe native to North America, the Common Snipe was once extremely abundant, especially on its wintering grounds in the southern United States. Their numbers declined, however, because of massive slaughters by market hunters in the late 19th century. Although the days of slaughter are over, they are still considered a game species and hunted in the fall.

This winter, challenge yourself - go on a real snipe hunt. But, leave the bag at home and arm yourself with binoculars, waterproof shoes and patience for the real birds are hard to find. And for company, see if you have any takers to the question, "Snipe hunting anyone?"



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