

The Uncommon Snipe

Jane Henderson

For me, one of the great joys of birding is having a brand new experience with a familiar bird. On a birding trip to western Manitoba early one summer I was thrilled to see and hear Wilson's Snipes engaged in aerial acrobatics while making haunting, ghostly sounds. They were on their breeding grounds, and this was their territorial display.

I had thought I knew snipes pretty well. Over the years, in mid-Atlantic bogs, marshes and damp fields where my friends and I often bird, I had seen snipes many times. Most often they were poking and prodding in the mud with their extraordinarily long bills. We count on finding them in the spring at Augustine Beach on the Delaware Bay shore in central Delaware. This is a busy place, not a remote area set aside for wildlife. The Salem, New Jersey nuclear power plant dominates the scenery. We walk across a grassy field toward a stand of cattails and flush as many as seven or eight snipes. Startled, they take off with long, pointed wings in their characteristic zigzag flight. Sometimes their abrupt takeoff startles us, too.

The snipes we saw and heard in Manitoba were not poking and prodding in the mud, though. These birds were displaying overhead and winnowing. I had never seen or heard them do that before. There, every day for two weeks, in nearly every place where we birded, especially in the morning and at dusk, we heard their eerie sound, "huhuhuhuhuhu," as they swooped downward through the sky. Even when we were intent on finding a new species for the trip, we never failed to be drawn to their haunting sound which can carry a quarter mile or more in open country.

It is not surprising that, before the mid 1800s, the winnowing of the snipe was believed to be some kind of supernatural occurrence. Later, various theories attributed the winnowing sound to the snipe's voice, wings or tail. The actual source of the sound was not discovered until just before the turn of the century.

In its courtship flight, the male snipe circles high overhead with rapid wingbeats, then plummets at a steep angle toward earth. In its downward plunge, in which it may attain a speed up to 60 mph, the snipe's outer tail feathers extend outward at nearly right angles to its body and vibrate. Scientific observation and

experimentation ultimately made it clear that wind rushing through these two uniquely constructed outer tail feathers, one on each side, creates the winnowing sound.

Louis Bevier, then a member of the bird department at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, explained the structure of the snipe's outer tail feathers to me this way: "The snipe's outer tail feather is specialized not only in width, but the outer web is narrow with stiff barbs that easily separate. The inner web has long stiff barbs strongly locked together. The snipes might be the only group of birds that certainly have musical tail feathers."

According to what I have read, snipes typically do most of their aerial winnowing in the evening or at night. In Manitoba, though, we heard them, and generally saw them too, almost every time we looked up, especially in the early morning and evening.

"Winnow" comes from the Latin *ventilare*, which means to fan. The first dictionary definition of the word "winnow," and the one most familiarly known, is "to separate wheat from chaff by a process of fanning or blowing." The sixth definition was what interested me: "to beat or fan (the air) with the wings" (Funk and Wagnalls, 1966).

Henry David Thoreau was probably the first to use the word "winnow" to apply specifically to the snipe. Leslie M. Tuck quotes Thoreau on the subject: "Persons walking up and down our village in still evenings at this season hear the singular winnowing sound in the sky over the meadows and know not what it is" (Tuck, 1972).

The sound of the snipe's aerial display is also sometimes described as bleating or drumming. Because of this, Tuck nicknamed this bird "The Goat of the Bogs." Early taxonomists named the bird *Capella gallinago*, meaning goat-like chicken. Its current Latin designation is *Gallinago delicata*. The Latin designation of the Common Snipe, a palearctic bird until recently considered to be conspecific with Wilson's Snipe, is *Gallinago gallinago*. These two species were split in late 2002.

The word "snipe" derives from the Anglo-Saxon "snout." "On account of the conspicuousness of its snite, or snout, the bird was commonly known as the

The Uncommon Snipe

‘snite,’ and did not become ‘snipe’ until fairly recently” (Tuck, 1972).

William Shakespeare, who often used birds as symbols of human qualities in his plays, used the modern spelling of “snipe” when Iago refers to Othello as a “snipe” (meaning “gull” or “fool”):

*For I mine own gained knowledge should
profane*

If I should time expend with such a snipe.

Because of the unearthly winnowing sound they produce, snipes figure prominently in folklore and mythology. In early Europe, for example, the snipe was sometimes referred to as the “thunder bird,” and believed to cause thunderstorms. This is probably because, on cloudy days or in heavy weather, when its feathers are damp, the winnowing sound tends to be louder. Most omens were related to the first appearance of the birds in spring. “In parts of Newfoundland, fishermen have long associated [snipe] with the arrival of lobsters inshore: ‘When the snipe bawls, the lobster crawls’” (Tuck, 1972).

Wilson’s Snipes breed over a wide area from northern Alaska to Labrador and south over most of United States to central California, eastern Arizona, northern New Mexico, and northern New Jersey (Farrand, 1983). They winter in unfrozen habitat across the United States, as well as parts of South America and the Caribbean.

Formerly a heavily hunted game bird, bag limits have now restricted the number that can be taken. In 1895, Frank M. Chapman wrote the following about the challenges and frustrations of snipe hunting: “...it springs from the grass as if thrown by a catapult, uttering a series of hoarse, rasping scapes which have a peculiarly startling effect on inexperienced nerves” (Chapman, 1895).

Literature Cited

- Funk & Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary. 1966. The Reader’s Digest Association, Inc.
- Tuck, L. M. 1972. The snipes: a study of the genus *Capella*. Can. Wildlife Ser. Monogr. Ser., No. 5.
- Shakespeare, W. Othello, Act. I, scene iii.
- Farrand, J. Jr., ed. 1983. Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding. Vol. 1. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. P. 406.
- Chapman, F. 1895. Birds of Northeastern North America. D. Appleton and Company, New York. Pp. 154-155.
- Ehrlich, P. R., D. S. Dobkin and D. Wheye. 1988. The Birder’s Handbook. Simon and Schuster, New York. P. 138.

202 Penn Oak Road
Flourtown, PA 19031

Snipes’ cryptic brown and tan patterning is very effective as a camouflage on the nest, which consists of dead grass, leaves or moss, and is nestled inconspicuously in grassy patches under low vegetation. The three or four eggs are pale olive-brown, marked with darker brown. They enjoy a varied diet including many different kinds of insects, crustaceans and amphibians, and eat dragonflies, damsel flies and crickets. They also feed on the larvae of flies, mosquitoes and water bugs. Small crustaceans, mollusks, earthworms, salamanders, frogs and centipedes make up the rest of their diet. They cast up the indigestible parts in small pellets. The snipe is also a heavy drinker (Ehrlich et al., 1988). After eating all those crawly and prickly things, it’s no wonder.

At the end of the trip to Manitoba, everybody took turns naming their three favorite birds. That year, we’d had wonderful views of a Ross’s Gull, a Yellow Rail, Willow Ptarmigans and Baird’s Sparrows. We had gotten great looks at a Northern Hawk Owl, Chestnut-collared and Smith’s Longspurs, Connecticut and Golden-winged Warblers, a Gray Partridge, a Sharp-tailed Grouse, the *nigra* race of the Common Eider, and even a gorgeous pair of King Eiders. They all got votes.

The bird I put in first place, though, was not one of those. The clear winner for me was the winnowing Wilson’s Snipe, *Gallinago delicata*. From now on, every time I see one industriously prodding and poking in the mud I will recall the remarkable sensation of first hearing, and then seeing their almost unearthly aerial display. What a bird!