

Wild Wednesday. 13 January 2021. Snipes by Walt Anderson

There are two kinds of snipe hunters. Some are people naïve and trusting enough to be led into the woods in the dark and told to wait for the others to drive a “snipe” toward them, which they should then capture with a bag or pillowcase. The pranksters then leave the victim in the dark and holding the bag. This becomes an experience to snipe about in later years.

But snipes are real birds, and a genuine snipe hunter has to be skilled at stalking, flushing, and shooting a cryptic, wary bird that erupts from the ground with a loud “scaipe” call as it zigzags away erratically. It is this combination of traits that also defines a military sniper.

Snipes are shorebirds, less likely to be in flocks than your typical sandpipers. Our Wilson’s Snipe breeds throughout Canada and Alaska and in the northern tier of states. It winters south of Canada and all the way down into the tropics.

Only a few nests have been found in Arizona, and those were in high elevation wetlands in years of good rains. Drought years like this are not conducive to snipe breeding in Arizona. Given the 90% or so loss of wetlands in Arizona, there isn’t all that much winter habitat either, though habitat for Snowbirds from northern states (e.g., at Quartzite) seems to increase annually.

We find them (if we are lucky) along streams like Granite Creek in the Dells or in the shallow parts of Willow Lake. Read along so you can be prepared in case anyone ever invites you on a snipe hunt.



Snipe resemble a chunk of animated mud, even more so when they flatten themselves out as a Peregrine flies over looking for something more obvious, like a duck or Killdeer. When the waterline is in the vegetation, they can be devilishly hard to see until you nearly step on them and they burst forth like a running back from the Alabama Crimson Tide. Not easy to stop.



Their long bills are designed for mud-probing, where they find larvae of aquatic insects or other invertebrates. They don't need binocular vision to do this, so the eyes are set well back on the head where they can keep an eye out for potential predators. To get these photos, I had to pretend to be a weathered piling, barely moving while trying to avoid becoming permanently stuck in the mud.



There are about 26 species of snipe worldwide, all cryptic and thus better identified by vocalizations and range than by basic appearance. Here is a Common Snipe, which breeds in Eurasia and winters in Africa, in this case at Lake Manyara in Tanzania.



Only in recent years has our Wilson's Snipe been separated from the look-alike Common Snipe of Eurasia. So how would you recognize a recent immigrant from Europe if you saw one? Both species do a "winnowing" flight display at dusk made with air flow over the tail feathers, modified by wing beats. The Wilson's has a "pure tremulo," while the Common sounds like a "bleating sheep or goat." So if you want to verify a snipe's identity, make it do a flight display. That might actually be harder than a snipe hunt!



Some people mistake a dowitcher for a snipe, though the former is often in flocks and is more uniformly colored without the dorsal racing stripes of a snipe. Dowitchers came in two species—Long-billed and Short-billed—but when probing in the mud, they all look alike. If you're an avian linguist and if you can make them talk, you're in business. Good luck on that!



Most snipe nests have four eggs, with the female doing all the incubation. The male hangs around, however, and helps lead a couple of the downy, precocial young around to find food. I once found young chicks in a sphagnum bog in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and did this scratchboard drawing as documentation. I think I identified with its disproportionately large feet.



Now that you know where to look (the middle of the woods on a dark night is the wrong habitat!), I encourage you to go out and so a little snipe hunting on your own.