

Short communication

Atypical aggregation of breeding Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago*

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The social organisation of the Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* during the breeding season is not well known. Dementiev & Gladkov (1951) considered it to be monogamous, refuting previous assertions to the contrary. More recent studies suggest that it has a rather loose type of monogamy as individuals may copulate with several others. However, males are territorial and the pair bond is reinforced during incubation (Tuck 1972, Glutz von Blotzheim *et al.* 1977, Reddig 1981). After hatching, both parents take care of the brood of generally four chicks, with each parent separately looking after one sub-brood.

During the spring of 1997, we made what appeared to be atypical observations on the reproduction of this species in the Marais Breton, Vendée, France (46°52'N, 2°03'W). The area comprises plots of grazed meadows surrounded by fresh-water ditches. The plots contain a succession of small, old salt-pans (locally called "baisse"), which are separated from each other by dykes ("bossis"), formed by the spoil earth that had been removed when the salt pans and the ditches were dug out (Fig. 1). Those baisse that had not been fed with salt water for a long time were colonized by *Glyceria fluitans* and *Juncus effusus* communities. Most of the year they are more or less inundated with rainwater. However, because less rain than usual fell in early 1997 (only 15% of mean rainfall in March and 30% in April), by May, they were already drying out. Besides Common Snipe, several pairs of Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* and Redshanks *Tringa totanus* nest there.

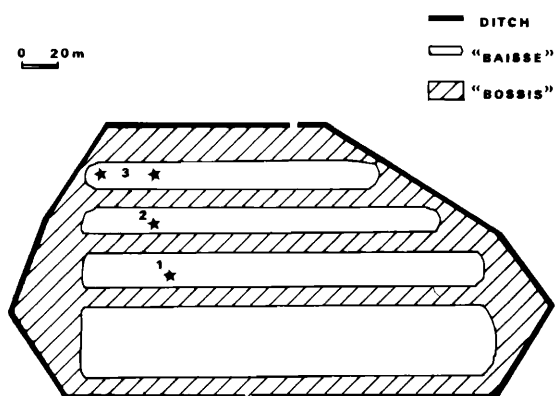


Fig.1. Map showing the part of the Marais Breton, Vendée, France, described in the text and the numbered sites where nests and chicks were found.

On May 12, in one particular baisse, we found a Common Snipe nest in which three eggs had been laid (site 1, Fig. 1). Shortly after, an adult took flight from a nearby baisse (site 2, Fig. 1). There, we found two chicks, a meter from each other, but of different ages and thus presumably from different broods, although apparently they were in the care of the same adult. One chick was about eight days old, the other, three weeks old. We ringed both.

The next day, in the same baisse (the site 2 baisse), we found a brood of three three-week-old chicks. We captured two of them, which were not ringed.

On the evening of 1 June, there were four eggs in the nest found on May 12 that were starting to hatch. The following afternoon, their state had not advanced, but by the afternoon of the next day, 3 June, the chicks had hatched and left the nest. During the morning of 4 June, we found two separate pairs of chicks, about 30 m apart in a different baisse (site 3, Fig. 1), and we considered that they were probably the chicks from the site 1 nest. The incubation of this clutch therefore took about 21 days, which corresponds to data in the literature (Cramp & Simmons 1983). Hatching lasted more than 24 hours.

On 2 June, at site 1, 3.5 m from the first nest, we found another nest in which a clutch had hatched. The state of the shell remains indicated that this clutch had hatched less than 10 days earlier. The two clutches therefore had been brooded simultaneously for at least ten days.

It therefore appears that in mid-May, in a very small area (<0.2 ha), there were at least two broods and also two clutches that were being incubated simultaneously. In the whole of the Marais Breton, which covers 32,000 ha, the breeding population of Common Snipe comprises only some tens of pairs (Trolliet & Ibañez 1994), despite the fact that much of it appears to be good nesting habitat. Therefore the overall density of nests is very low. If one takes account of the territoriality of the males, the aggregation of nests and broods we found is remarkable. According to Tuck (1972), only in exceptional circumstances may density exceed two pairs per hectare. The minimum distances between simultaneously active nests cited in the literature are 10 m on St Kilda, Scotland (Cramp & Simmons 1983) and 15 m in Schleswig-Holstein (Glutz von Blotzheim *et al.* 1977).

Therefore, the two nests we found are an extreme case, which was not imposed on the birds by the environment. The nest sites had no distinctive features and they were both very similar to many other potential nesting sites in the Marais Breton. On the basis of what is known about the breeding

