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WILSON'S AND COMMON SNIPES

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Taxonomic History

Described by Ord in 1825, Wilson's Snipe (*Gallinago delicata*) enjoyed the status of a full species through the 4th edition of the AOU Check-list (1931). Then, with the publication of the 20th supplement to its *Checklist of North American Birds*, the AOU (1945) decided to treat it as conspecific with the Common Snipe (*G. gallinago*) of the Old World. The reference cited for this change was the treatment in Witherby et al. (1940). In lumping these two taxa, Witherby et al. (1940) relied on the comments made by Meinertzhagen (1924) at a meeting of the British Ornithologists' Club. Meinertzhagen pointed out that except for the width of the outer tail feathers all of the visual characters known at the time overlapped. Flight-display sounds were not analyzed. *Gallinago delicata* was not the only species lumped within *G. gallinago*. The African Snipe (*G. nigripennis*), the South American Snipe (*G. paraguaiiae*), and the Puna Snipe (*G. andina*) were also included, although studies of display sounds led eventually to these three taxa being resplit. Given that *G. delicata* has display sounds distinctly different from those of *G. gallinago* (Miller 1996), for consistency with the treatment of other species the AOU (2002) restored Wilson's Snipe to full species status. The British Ornithologists' Union has not resplit these two taxa, and on the basis of haplotypes found in restriction fragments of mitochondrial DNA of two specimens of each, Zink et al. (1995) reported that the genetic difference between them is minor. Between the two species, because of the different shapes and lengths of the outer tail feathers, the "winnowing" sounds produced during aerial display ("drumming flights") by air rushing past the spread outer tail feathers differ distinctly. The outer tail feathers can be extended at right angles to the body and vibrate loudly when air passes over their vanes during a display flight. Both males and females can produce the resulting winnowing sounds, but males display more often (Mueller 2005). The sexes' tail-feather shapes and sizes are similar. The sounds produced by Wilson's Snipe are distinctly higher pitched than those of the Common Snipe because the outer tail feathers are shorter and substantially narrower. The wider outer tail feathers of the Common Snipe produce a lower-pitched vibrato. The two species' "skiape" call notes (a vocalization that the birds give when flushed) sound basically identical.

Distribution

Wilson's Snipe is a monotypic species widespread across North America, while the polytypic Common Snipe (comprising *G. g. gallinago* and *G. g. faeroeensis*) is widespread across Eurasia. In North America the Common Snipe is best known as a regular migrant through the western Aleutian Islands, especially in spring. In some years, a few may summer, and a nest was found on Attu in 1984 (Gibson and Byrd 2007). The Common Snipe has also been collected on Shemya Island in winter. Farther east it is much less regular, but it has been collected as far east as Adak Island (Aleutian status from Gibson and Byrd 2007). It also occurs with some regularity as far north and east as the Pribilof Islands (specimens). It is apparently only casual farther north, on St. Lawrence Island (specimens). It is unrecorded from the Alaska mainland.

Elsewhere in North America, there is a specimen of the Common Snipe from eastern Canada (24 December 1927, Jack Lane Bay, eastern Labrador—Austin

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1932; analysis with photos of specimens by Holder and Trimble 2003). The species is casual in Greenland and accidental in Bermuda (AOU 1998).

Wilson's Snipe breeds in the eastern Aleutians as far west as Unalaska, and there are two recent spring records (one specimen) as far west as Adak, in the central Aleutians (Gibson and Byrd 2007). It has been reported (on the basis of display sounds) from the Pribilof Islands and St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea, but to date there are no specimens or archival audio recordings.

Identification

The two photographs on this issue's back cover compare Wilson's and Common Snipes, and the poses allow study of the underwings that is rarely possible in the field. The Wilson's Snipe was photographed on 11 July 2006 at Carden Plain, Ontario; the Common Snipe was photographed on 14 March 2004 in Thailand.

Useful identification summaries, illustrated with color sketches and/or photos, appear in Carey and Olsson (1995), Bland (1998), and Bland (1999). Criteria have not been fully worked out for identifying in the field either vagrant Common Snipes in North America or vagrant Wilson's Snipes in Eurasia (Rowlands et al. in press). Positive identification of either species (as a vagrant) requires either a specimen or photographs that allow close scrutiny of plumage details rarely visible to birders in the field. We offer no new identification criteria here, but the superb photos on the back cover illustrate some of the known differences. It bears repeating that many of the published differences between Wilson's and Common Snipes are averages only and that in these characters the species overlap to some degree.

On average, the Common Snipe is a warmer-colored bird with weaker barring on the sides and flanks and has broader white tips to the underwing coverts, resulting in a whiter underwing. The photograph of a Common Snipe on the back cover shows a bird with extensively white underwings and axillaries. Compare this to the densely barred pattern on the underwings of the Wilson's Snipe, especially on the axillaries (these feathers are typically 50% or more black in Wilson's). Alderfer's examination of skins (28 spread wings, USNM) showed very little variation in the pattern of underwings and axillaries in Wilson's Snipe. However, variation in the pattern of the underwings and axillaries in the Common Snipe is extensive, with a few specimens approaching Wilson's Snipe in density of barring. (This feature is difficult to assess in standard museum study skins.) A snipe with mostly white underwing coverts and white or lightly barred axillaries is almost certainly a Common Snipe, but the reverse is not necessarily true. Some Common Snipes have barred axillaries and underwing coverts very similar to Wilson's, particularly those from Asia, which generally have more heavily marked underwings (USNM skins). Alderfer examined seven specimens of the Common collected in North America (St. George Island in the Pribilof Islands, Alaska). The axillaries on those specimens were 20–40% black, but all seven had white or white-tipped underwing coverts that formed noticeable white patches. None of those specimens had axillaries as lightly barred as the bird in the back cover photograph. The back cover photograph shows a paler example of a Common Snipe from Thailand whose underwing coverts and axillaries are quite different from those of any Wilson's Snipe specimens that Alderfer examined.

In flight, from both above and below, the Common Snipe usually shows an obvious white trailing edge to the secondaries. This feature is not readily visible in the photograph—a few secondary tips are partially visible behind the outermost primary. A white trailing edge is usually faint, at best, in Wilson's—the narrow, white secondary tips can be seen in the photograph—and the width of the white tips averages much narrower than in the Common Snipe. A few specimens of Wilson's show broader white tips to the secondaries approaching those of the Common. This feature is an indicative—but not diagnostic—field mark.

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The pattern and hue of the pale stripes on the head and scapulars appear to be quite variable in both species and of little use in identification. Wilson's Snipe averages darker (blackier) dorsally and often shows white dots ("pips") on the dark-centered scapulars. The scapulars average paler (warmer brown) on the Common Snipe and tend to show thin wavy bars on the interior, rather than white pips. Common Snipe specimens from Asia average darker above than European specimens but have similar barring on the scapulars. Common Snipes of the subspecies *faeroeensis*, breeding in Iceland and the Faeroe Islands, have scapulars with intricate interior barring (quite distinctive), appear warmer above (more rufous), and have upperwing coverts that are more uniformly barred (rather than dotted with pale marks). From what could be seen on the seven specimens of *faeroeensis* examined, the axillaries appear rather heavily barred (40–50% black), but the underwing coverts show extensive whitish areas.

In-hand features not visible in the photographs on the back cover (and almost impossible to see in the field) include the width of the outermost tail feathers and the number of tail feathers. The width of the outermost tail feathers may be the most reliable and diagnostic feature for distinguishing these two species (Rowlands et al. in press) and, significantly, are the feature responsible for the different winnowing sounds produced during display flights that were largely responsible for the species being resplit. Meinertzhagen (1924) published this important distinction early on and gave a range of measurements with no zone of overlap. Bland (1999) gave the following average widths, measured 20 mm from the feather's tip: Common 12.8 mm, Wilson's 7.2 mm. The difference could probably be appreciated on a razor-sharp image of a bird with its tail fanned. Meinertzhagen (1924) pointed out that the pattern on the outermost tail feathers averages more barred and that the bars are blacker on Wilson's Snipe, but the variability of this pattern in the Common Snipe renders this feature only suggestive of one species or the other. Additionally, the number of tail feathers averages higher in Wilson's (16) than in the Common (14, but as few as 12 and as many as 18) (Meinertzhagen 1924). This feature is very difficult to assess on specimens and useless in the field—the rectrices are mostly obscured by the tail coverts and usually tightly stacked.

In conclusion, other than on the western Aleutians and Bering Sea islands, the Common Snipe is virtually unknown in North America. Other than at those locations, the field identification of a vagrant Common Snipe would likely require exceptional observation conditions and high-quality photographs showing a suite of field marks. On the basis of our examination of museum skins, snipes with mostly unbarred axillaries and large white areas on the underwings (as in the photograph) can reliably be identified as the Common. Wilson's Snipe shows very little variation on the underwings and axillaries—all that Alderfer examined were densely barred and lacked large white patches. The width of the outermost tail feather is another reliable distinction but not useful in the field.

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