



Pointer dogs are used to find snipe in other states, but boggy conditions in Texas are not conducive to pointers.



THE WILSON'S SNIPE

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One of the most sporting (and tasty) game birds in North America is the Wilson's Snipe, also known as the Jacksnipe.

REDEFINE YOUR DEFINITION OF A SNIPE HUNT

The snipe is probably the most misunderstood and underutilized game bird in North America. It is only one of two shorebirds that can be legally hunted under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act; the other being the American Woodcock. They are legal game birds in every state except Hawaii.

Daily bag limits are generous with eight birds. But, be forewarned, you will need to be either a crackerjack shot or have plenty of shells to harvest a limit.

Snipe hunting habitat is generally not crowded with most snipe hunting in Texas occurring on private lands, especially those managed for waterfowl. Public lands offer limited snipe hunting opportunities. Snipe hunting is a great way to extend and fine-tune your upland and waterfowl hunting seasons.

ABOUT SNIPE

Snipe average in weight between 2.8 to 5.2 ounces, making it our smallest North American game bird by weight. They are a medium-sized migratory bird, 9 to 11 inches in length with a 15- to 18-inch wingspan. Sporting impeccable camouflage to blend in with the wetlands they inhabit, the males and females are similar in appearance. According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the continental breeding population of Wilson's snipe is around 2 million, with an annual average harvest of 105,000 birds between 2006 and 2010 in the United States and Canada.

Snipe are migratory. They breed in the Northern states and across all of Canada, then migrate in the winter to Southern states and beyond into Mexico and Central America. The best states for snipe hunting, per United States Fish and Wildlife Service harvest data from the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 seasons, are Florida, Louisiana, Texas, Alabama and California. In Texas, they can appear just about anywhere with abundant moist-soil



conditions, but data from the Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count indicates the majority of wintering snipe are found along the coast and the blackland prairie region stretching from Waco north to the Red River.

During courtship, a male will fly high in an elaborate dance in the sky and make a whistling or “winnowing” sound as air passes over his specially modified outer tail feathers. The sound, described as ghost-like, is audible for long distances and is used to defend his territory and attract a mate. Sounds of the Wilson’s Snipe including “winnowing” and the flush “scaipe” call can be found at Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s Online Bird Guide at www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Wilsons_Snipe/sounds.

Snipe build nests in small grass cups located either on the ground or on a hummock of grass associated with water. The clutch size is usually four eggs. Upon hatching, the male will take and tend the first two chicks, and the female will depart with the other two; the adults will have no more interaction with one another.

Snipe feed primarily on earthworms during non-breeding periods, according to Dr. Bart Ballard, professor and research scientist at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. However, during the spring, snipe divide their diet equally between earthworms and aquatic insects. They also consume plant foods, almost entirely seed mass, during the non-breeding period, which comprises 9.7 – 26 percent of their total diet.

Although few studies have been done on the Wilson’s Snipe, additional information has been prioritized by the Migratory Shore and Upland Game Bird Support Task Force to reduce uncertainties underlying management decisions for snipe.

Rob Sawyer’s book, *The History of Waterfowl Hunting in Texas*, notes that the Trinity River delta bogs were one of the best snipe-shooting grounds on the Texas coast at the turn of the century. Noted hunter Forrest McNeir shot nearly 1,400 snipe in a week’s time. In the Galveston markets, when selling of game was legal, a dozen snipe would fetch a dollar, which in today’s dollars is approximately \$30.

The protection of migratory birds began in 1918 with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act ending all commercial bird hunting. In 1928 it became illegal to hunt all shorebirds with the exception of snipe and woodcock.

SIMILAR TO SNIPE

The endless array of shorebird types including plovers, stilts, sandpipers, godwits, peeps, phalaropes, dowitchers and woodcock are certainly a detriment to a novice going afield to hunt snipe. In the sandpiper family of *Scolopacidae*, of which the Wilson’s Snipe belongs, there are dozens of species.

If you are a snipe hunting novice, it is probably best to go afield with a seasoned hunter. Not only will they show you the ins-and-outs of snipe hunting, they will quickly point out the one distinguishing trait that will set a snipe apart from others, the flushing shout of *scaipe!* when they flush. Once you hear and see a few snipe launch from cover, you will mount your shotgun with confidence.

The closest shorebird resembling and occupying similar habitats to Wilson’s Snipe is perhaps the Short-billed Dowitcher. The Wilson’s Snipe have shorter, stocky legs, along with three long buff-colored streaks down the back, a striped head, and



Think shallow water and mud flats when looking for good snipe habitat.



in flight an orange-colored tail is often seen—differentiating it from a dowitcher.

Although both will occupy the same wetlands, the dowitchers are more likely to be seen in more open water, often in larger flocks. The Wilson's Snipe will be found in denser marsh vegetation, often solitary or in very loose small scattered groups, never departing in flock-type formations.

The American Woodcock is also similar in appearance, but it is mostly a bird of moist woodlands with an unmarked cinnamon belly as opposed to the white belly and barred flanks of the Wilson's snipe.

READYING FOR SNIPE

Getting in shape and being a proficient trap shooter are two of the most important elements for putting more snipe on the table.

Like quail hunting, you will cover a lot of ground searching for your quarry. The big difference is that you are generally walking in muck. Every step is an exercise in keeping your boots from being sucked off your feet.

I like to hunt in well-fitting boots because waders of any sort become burdensome and hot in short order. Boots also afford you an easier shooting platform than bulky waders. A one-second delay in snipe hunting is an eternity and will most likely mean a long shot or no shot at all as the snipe fires its afterburners.

Never seen a snipe burst out of a cluster of sedge? Have someone take a long hot-dog shaped balloon, fill it with air and release it in front of you. You have just witnessed the flight of a snipe.

The word “sniper,” associated with military marksmen, came from British sportsmen hunting snipe before the 20th century. Sharp-shooting hunters who could consistently down the fleet, erratically flying birds were called “snipers.”

The snipe hunting practice is trap shooting. Clays are launched away and up in a fast-straight line from the shooter mimicking the snipe's initial flight. On days when birds hold tight, “snap-shooting” will yield more birds as long as you do it safely and know where your hunting companions are at all times.

Prior to hunting, scout out a few fields to hunt. Look for shallow mud flats or water with associated ankle-deep to knee-deep cover. But be warned snipe are notorious for leaving an area overnight.

HOW TO HUNT SNIPE

Travel light. Less is more—from your gun's weight to the ammo carried to your dress.

If birds are holding tight and have received little hunting pressure, a 20-gauge with open chokes is an excellent option. If birds have been shot at, a modified or full choke 12-gauge may be required to knock down a few of the sporting “bottle rockets.”

I carry no more than one box of shells when trudging after snipe, although I always have a couple of extra boxes waiting for me back at the truck for “one of those days” type of shooting. Shot size is similar to dove hunting. Select No. 8 or No.



The protected Short-billed Dowitcher is perhaps closest in similarities to a Wilson's Snipe.

9 lead shot for tight-holding birds and No. 7 1/2 on days with longer shots.

If hunting public lands, be sure to check on the legality of using lead shot. Never carry lead shot when you are hunting ducks and geese, as this is a migratory game law violation.

Waist-belt type game bags allow more fluid shooting than game vests. Clothing should be loose and sparse even on cooler days. You will warm up quickly chasing snipe, and if you wear a hunting jacket, it will eventually end up tied around your waist.

In Texas the tried-and-true way of hunting snipe is in a small group, walking slowly inline similar to quail hunting. Periodic stops will often flush snipe allowing the shooter a better chance at bagging a bird. Unpressured birds will often fly a short distance and plop down offering a second opportunity, and sometimes even a third flush, in rare instances even a fourth try!

But pressured snipe are legendary, often flushing afar, always with afterburners on, zigging when you are zagging with your gun, leading one to believe they are fast enough to dodge a stream of trailing pellets. There is a nano-moment of no more than two seconds when snipe initially flush that they fly true and straight. During this fleeting instant one has a legitimate crack at a bird; afterwards you are at the whims of a knuckleball heading skyward, a big reason you want to be light and mobile.

Although you never really know what direction a flushed snipe will fly, you can stack the odds by working cover with the wind at your back so that birds will rise initially towards you and not away. Also try to work with the sun at your back. It is tough enough to hit one in good light, let alone with a glare in your eyes.

Carry a bright orange or red bandana for marking downed birds. Snipe—more than any other game bird—can disappear into earth with their perfect camouflage, even when you're standing directly over the downed bird. After downing a snipe, move directly to the bird, not veering for a second from the site they went down. Using a marker, you can begin the focused methodical search for the downed snipe.





Unlike dowitchers that often flush in mass, snipe usually flush in singles or pairs.

Better yet, use a marker along with a good retriever. Keep your dog searching around the marker. Most retrievers readily pick up the scent of a snipe and eagerly bring it to hand. In some areas of the country pointers are used to locate snipe, but in the boggy environs of Texas snipe habitat pointer dogs tire quickly. Retrievers are better suited to finding downed birds in Texas.

WHERE TO HUNT SNIPE

Hunt any of the ephemeral wetlands generally associated with duck and goose hunting. Generally private leases prioritize their hunting, with ducks and geese taking precedence, but come the end of waterfowl season—usually during the last week in January—you will have a cornucopia of places to hunt, mostly to yourself.

When initially looking at habitat that may harbor snipe, think damp over wet. Snipe hold in specific locations mainly to probe mud flats and shallow waters for worms. Snipe use their long bill with highly sensitive receptors to probe the soil for their food, resembling a slow-running sewing machine in process. Patchworks of small holes in the mud are telltale signs that snipe are present.



The Wilson's Snipe flush call of *scaipe* is a sure way to identify them in flight.





The snipe season in Texas is lengthy with a generous daily bag limit.

If the water level exceeds what they can comfortably wade in, then they will likely avoid it. Damp areas include marshes, potholes, river and lake edges, drainage ditches, bottomlands, and wet agricultural fields. Heavy rainfall overnight will redistribute birds.

Good snipe hunting habitat requires cover. While snipe can be found in open fields with sparse cover, thicker protective cover will hold the birds tighter making them less likely to flush from afar.

WHEN TO HUNT SNIPE

Snipe migrate in the fall with the onset of a northern frost-line. Large influxes of birds into Texas can occur any time from October on. During their spring migration out of Texas, snipe can be abundant one day and leave the next with warm southern winds pushing them to the frost-line to the north. They are unpredictable birds, arriving in mass one day and completely vacating a hot spot the next.

Snipe seasons are long in each state: For the 2018–2019 season, Texas hunters will have 107 days to hunt snipe Oct. 27 – Feb. 10.

WHY TO HUNT SNIPE

The genus name *gallinago* is New Latin for a woodcock or snipe from Latin gallina, “hen” and the suffix -ago, “resembling.” The scientific species name is *delicata* for “dainty,” although my interpretation of *delicata* is exquisite eating. They are soft, rich and tender—a culinary delight.

Winston Churchill once demanded “a brace of snipe washed down with a pint of port” as a hangover cure while on a transatlantic flight to Washington, D.C. Roast snipe is a rare treat, traditionally skewered with their long beaks before cooking.

Many claim they are the best game bird to eat, and I concur. Jesse Griffiths book, *Afield*, and Susan Ebert’s book, *The Field To Table Cookbook*, both offer excellent recipes for snipe.

If you can shoot a snipe, you probably can shoot just about anything else that flies. Consistently harvesting snipe without going through a case of No. 8s will make teal look like slow-flying barn doors. 

