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Snipe Hunting — For Real

By Rob Heflin - February 3, 2009

Christmas has come and gone, and deer and duck seasons are coming to an end in Mississippi. Most of us have fattened up over the holidays, and the brutal, late-winter weather might have us spending a little too much time indoors munching on the candied pecans.

The good news is that there are plenty of outdoor activities in February that are great exercise and provide an excellent opportunity to put game on the table. One such activity is snipe hunting.

According to Webster, there are two definitions for snipe — 1: any of various usually slender-billed birds of the same family as the sandpipers; especially: any of several game birds (especially genus Gallinago) especially of marshy areas; 2: a contemptible person.

Since it's only legal in Mississippi to shoot the snipe that fall under definition one, we'll talk about those.

The Wilson's Snipe is what you will find in the southeastern U.S. You've probably seen them; they do appear "sandpiper-like" with their long bills and legs, but are often confused with plovers and dowitchers.

Snipe have a dark brown to black coloration on their backs, with yellow stripes running neck to tail and a yellowish dusting on their feather fringes. The neck and breast area is a mottled pattern of white and brown, and they have white bellies. Their heads are striped black, brown and white, and they have a rusty-brown rump above their blunt tails. Their legs are an olive color, and their dark-brown bills are roughly half the length

Biology and migration

Snipe breed in Canada and the northern U.S., and they winter from southern Alaska all the way down through South Carolina. The population is estimated to be near two million. The first migrants to the Gulf Coast states arrive usually in mid-August. Migration occurs in October and November.

It is not uncommon in the Delta to see several snipe feeding in rice and soybean fields along the roadside. In fact, migration maps, the Delta region of Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas is one of the hottest spots in the nation to

Snipe are often seen in shallow-flooded agricultural fields, or open, marshy areas in fallow fields. They forage these areas for larvae, earthworms, crustaceans and mollusks. They don't frequent the wooded areas like woodcock, but prefer marshy areas. If you stop long enough and scan these marshy areas, you'll sometimes notice the snipe walking in the inches-deep muck for food.

Hunting methods



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The silhouette of a flying snipe is unmistakable. The bird is stocky, with short wings and a long, slender bill. It has a screeching alarm call when flushed, which is a clue a hunter has that a bird is nearby.

Hunting snipe is not very popular, but that's because most people don't own a burlap sack, and don't care to spend hours in the woods, after dark, holding that sack open while their friends hoop and holler in the distance. I get many laughs when I ask for permission to hunt snipe in their fields.

In reality, you hunt snipe with a gun, and getting the limit of birds is easier said than done. Rarely have I come home with a limit of snipe, but I always enjoy the hunting.

The ideal gun for snipe hunting is a light-weight 20-gauge. Walking muddy fields, especially my beloved Delta gumbo, is difficult itself. You know what they say about Delta gumbo — it's what keeps the water out of Hell. Toting a heavy gun for hours through this extremely adhesive soil is no fun.

A snipe is slightly smaller than a dove, so you don't need a lot of gun to knock one down. A 20-gauge with No. 6 shot is plenty of firepower if you are a quick shot and can get on the birds before they fly out of range. But if you're a little slow or want to pack the 12 and go with some heavy loads for longer ranges.

Walk 'em up

I am usually unexpectedly alerted to the presence of snipe in a field when they flush wildly in front of me as I walk. It is difficult to see, as their coloration blends perfectly with the dark, wet soil and scattered plant matter on the ground. Snipe have a wild, erratic flight pattern at first, and then they usually group up and seem to take a more predictable flight path. They make an unmistakable, raspy screech.

If you don't get a shot as they flush, just stop where you are and wait. I've noticed that snipe will usually circle back and offer you several shots before exiting the area. But you've got to be quick; if you think hitting a September dove you're in for a rude awakening when you try to gun down a snipe.

Interestingly enough, the term "sniper" is derived from the word "snipe," and its first usage described anyone skilled at hunting one of the wary little birds.

Jeff Anastasio of Covington, La., says that snipe hunting in the marsh as a youngster probably did more good for him than anything else he did.

"Growing up, you could still walk the marsh I hunt, and we used to hunt rice fields around Lake Charles," he said. "Snipe were what I would call a snipe mecca.

"Every afternoon when the grownups were done eating, they would shut her down for their afternoon naps. Before I went to sleep, he would hand me a box of 20-gauge shells, and off I would go. I would walk miles, all over the place; my purpose was to jump up snipe. I can honestly say this routine benefited my wingshooting more than anything else I have ever done. I learned a lot of shooting lessons as a kid.

"I would always find the snipe somewhere, and a normal day would be five to seven snipe, a duck or two and on occasion a specklebellies. Still to this day, I have trouble passing up an area that is loaded with snipe.

Anastasio recently got to hunt snipe again in the spillway area, and he was able to introduce a new retriever to the area.

Ambush 'em

Some hunters have even gone so far as to fashion homemade snipe decoys because there are no known snipe decoys. Believe it or not, snipe will decoy readily, and having a few decoys may make the difference between bringing in the birds or aimlessly slugging through the muck empty-handed.

Ramsey Russell, an avid hunter from Brandon, and owner of getducks.com, has traveled the world in search of food. He has hunted snipe in South America and Canada, as well as his Willow Break property in the Mississippi Delta. He has hunted snipe over his hand-made snipe decoys.

Russell fashions the fakes out of plywood and inserts a wooden dowel for a stand. Slightly larger than your hand, they are very effective in luring passing snipe within shooting range.

“I made profiles from sketches drawn on a few left over pieces of ply board and painted to resemble snipe, but I made them twice the size of snipe, and used longer dowels to increase their visibility, especially in rice stubble and moist-soil fields. It has a certain charm,” he said.

Since they’re flat, a dozen or so can be placed inside a shell bag or backpack and carried to the field. After putting them in the shallow water where snipe have previously been located or flushed, the hunter then conceals himself and waits in a blind style, for the snipe to return.

“I place the profiles along a mudflat that snipe have been using frequently,” Russell said. “Rice and bean fields, especially those that have been temporarily flooded repeatedly with winter rainfall are very productive.

“The wet-dry cycles and decaying vegetation create perfect conditions for snipe’s primary food source: invertebrates. The hunter can see where snipe have probed the wet soil with their mandibles while foraging.

“Pulling a few boards immediately after duck season to expose mudflats in flooded agricultural fields or moist-soil fields usually creates shooting opportunities for snipe after waterfowl season. Same as ducks, doves or woodcock — if there is a high concentration of snipe one season, chances are they will be in there in subsequent seasons too.”

Russell adds that snipe respond amazingly well to the decoys, usually dropping into the spread very swiftly and at an angle, which makes for challenging shooting.

He also warns that snipe aren’t the only shorebirds attracted to the hand-made fakes.

“Be sure to identify your targets, especially toward the end of the season, because yellowlegs and other shorebirds migrate northward and will readily decoy as well,” he said. “We usually walk onto the mudflat and flush birds so that the greatest concentration is foraging, set up decoys, hide and wait for the birds to return.”

Regardless of the method you use to hunt snipe, they are a fun game bird to pursue and they are fine table fare. I usually cook dove breasts — marinate, wrap in bacon and slow cook on low heat.

When the action is slow in the duck hole and the third dove season is over, snipe hunting can be a fulfilling experience. The 2008-09 snipe season runs through Feb. 22, and the limit is eight per day.

Snipe are migratory birds, so you must use a shotgun plugged so that it is not capable of holding more than three shells. A 12-gauge is legal to use.

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