

WILSON'S SNIPE**Donald Shephard**

The Wilson's Snipe is not a difficult bird to identify, if you can find it. Named for the great American ornithologist, Alexander Wilson, who first described the difference between the European Snipe, *Gallinago gallinago* and our species *G. delicata*. In the beginning of the twentieth century, Arthur Cleveland Bent considered our birds a subspecies of the European. In 2003, it was given its own species status. Wilson's Snipe differs from the Common Snipe in having a narrower white trailing edge to the wings, and eight pairs of tail feathers instead of the seven of the Common Snipe.



Wilson's Snipe photo by Sean Breazeal, Talshiarr

Only one species of snipe exists in Britain so, in their arrogance, the English call it Snipe. About 30,000 pairs breed there, but many more flood into the country from Scandinavia and Iceland.

They are well known in the Norfolk fens and similar British wetlands. When I lived in the Central Valley and stopped by vernal pools or the muddy stubble of flooded winter fields, a glance often revealed no activity, but a careful scan with my binoculars showed a variety of shorebirds migrating through. Once again, I saw this round bird with its long beak. Apart from its cryptic coloring, two main reasons account for the uncommon status of Wilson's Snipe. In the early twentieth century, Bent wrote "numbers (of snipe) have been sadly depleted during the past fifty years by excessive shooting." The other cause of decline is the draining of lowland grassland and its conversion to intensive agriculture. As we drain our wetlands, so we diminish the habitat of this species and many others.

In my faithful Sibley's *Field Guide to Birds of Western North America* I have recorded spotting a Wilson's Snipe at Pudding Creek on October 19th, 2008. Becky Bowen tells me she has never recorded one on her Save Our Shorebirds surveys, but saw two on a Christmas Bird Count in Elk in a field behind the Community Center. They were vocal in their annoyance at the human presence while totally ignoring pounding rain.

Wilson's Snipes are beautifully camouflaged, subtly marked with lines and patches of bluff, brown, pale chestnut and black. They have short greenish-grey legs and pointed wings. Bold, cream stripes mark the back. Their strongly striped head and long bill provide instant recognition. Look for the white trailing edges of their wings and white sides of the tail, both most obvious as it brakes for landing. Listen for the harsh *scresh* call, like tearing cloth.

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continued

They breed in marshes, bogs, tundra and wet meadows in Canada and the northern United States. They are year-round residents on the northern most U.S. Pacific Coast, but not in Coastal California. The eastern population migrates to the southern United States and to northern South America. It may be that climate change causes these birds to move to their breeding range earlier and leave later than 100 years ago. In Ohio for example, late April was recorded as an average migration date in 1906, but now most of the local population is present on the breeding grounds by that date.

Should you be fortunate enough to visit their breeding grounds, you may witness a flight display, known as "winnowing", in which air rushing through outer tail feathers produces a low pulsing whistle as these birds dives from high. They have been observed "winnowing" throughout the day and long into the night. The "winnowing" sound is similar to the call of a Boreal Owl. They nest in a well-hidden location on the ground.

Here they move slowly through vegetation, probing deep in the mud with a repetitive up-and-down "sewing-machine" motion. Well-camouflaged, they are usually shy and conceal themselves close to ground vegetation, flushing only when approached closely. They fly off in a series of aerial zig-zags to confuse predators. Wilson's Snipes eat insects, earthworms, and other creatures that burrow in wet soil. They also eat leaves and seeds.

If you have not been lucky enough to spot one of these shy and well camouflaged birds, do not give up. Jerry White, a fine inland birder who frequently visits the coast, reported seeing one on Virgin Creek Beach on September 20 and 21. A Pectoral Sandpiper accompanied it.

Jerry also saw a Long-billed Curlew and a Marbled Godwit. Once again local beaches provide infinite pleasure to the keen, observant bird watcher.

Wilson's Snipe
photo by
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LeValleyphoto.com



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