

Snipe in Southland

Single snipe, probably Japanese Snipe (*Gallinago hardwickii*), were seen on a freshwater bog behind Colac Bay, Southland, between 19 December 1984 and 21 March 1985. Two snipe were seen on 22 March 1985. This is the southernmost record of migratory snipe in New Zealand. A summary of previous New Zealand records is given.

The "Henderson Extension" of Lake George Wildlife Management Reserve, Colac Bay, is an extensive freshwater bog with many artificial tarns and canals. The pond nearest the end of the access road held a small group of migrant waders during the 1984-85 summer (Miskelly & Cooper, this issue). Snipe were generally flushed from the edges of this pond.

KM & JVM found the first snipe on 19 December 1984. The bird rose from rushes about 5 m away, flew in wide circles about 20 m above the pond for 3 minutes, before landing abruptly 100 m away. It was flushed twice more and called a gruff *schnappe* on each occasion.

WJC was unaware of the previous sighting when he visited the area on 20 December. A snipe flushed from the edge of the pool 20-25 m from him, gave several harsh calls, rose to a maximum height of 25 m, and circled three times before making a long, low approach and pitching at the edge of the same pool, 40-50 m further north. When approached, the bird flushed at 2-3 m with a whirr of wings, giving the same calls, then flew fast and low before landing among rushes 60 m away. It could not be found again.

There was a gap of nearly three months before more sightings.

On 16 March 1985, CMM, WJC & G. J. Eller startled a snipe 500 m north of the pond. This bird flew back past them, 15 m above the swamp, and dropped into an inaccessible area 1 km to the east. On 21 March, CMM & GJE flushed a snipe which rose with a Pectoral Sandpiper (*Calidris melanotos*). The snipe gave five or six harsh calls and flew in wide circles for 2 minutes before pitching 1 km away.

The following afternoon (22 March), CMM flushed two snipe in close succession. One bird continued flying to the east until lost to sight, while the other landed and was flushed a second time.

All five sightings of snipe near Lake George were of birds in flight, and so detailed descriptions could not be made. However, all observers noted the long straight bill, short neck and stock body. The tail was short with a rounded tip and the wings were long and pointed. The legs did not project beyond the tail. KM & JVM considered it to be larger than Common Snipe (*G. gallinago*), with which they are familiar. The snipe flew with fast wing beats, rolling the body as it flew away.

The upperparts were rich brown with two pale longitudinal stripes on the scapulars. The breast was buffish and the belly off-white with four or five strong brown bars on the flank near the axilla. The underwing appeared dark at a distance, but was noted as being dusky white with fine dark barring. The flight feathers were dark. No wing bar was seen.

Japanese (Latham's) Snipe breeds in Japan and summers in southern Australia, arriving in Queensland from August on, and then moving south. They are highly mobile, probably moving in response to rainfall. Single birds or small groups occupy muddy edges of fresh, and sometimes saline, swamps and pools (Blakers *et al.* 1984).

Japanese Snipe are the commonest snipe in eastern Australia. However, Swinhoe's Snipe (*G. megala*) and Pin-tailed Snipe (*G. stenura*) have been recorded from northern Australia (Blakers *et al.* 1984, Simpson & Day 1984). Both these species breed in Siberia and migrate to Africa, Asia and Australia, although *G. stenura* has a more westerly distribution than *G. megala*. Swinhoe's Snipe is probably the main snipe species summering in the Top End and Kimberley regions of Australia, where it occurs around freshwater swamps and pools (Blakers *et al.* 1984), but they also occur in Papua-New Guinea east to New Ireland (J. L. McKean *in litt.*).

Identifying migratory snipe by sight in New Zealand will continue to be difficult because few snipe occur and few observers are familiar with Asian snipe. The birds we saw were unlikely to have been *G. stenura* because of the locality, habitat, and large size. Large size and the loud, harsh call also suggest *G. hardwickii* rather than *G. megala*.

The only confirmed Japanese Snipe from New Zealand were shot at Arch Hill, Auckland, in March 1898 and at Castlecliff, Wanganui, in October 1914 (Oliver 1955, Kinsky 1970). Sight records of snipe assumed to be *G. hardwickii* were made at Taieri Beach, Otago, in January 1941 & 1942 ((Oliver 1955); Ahuriri Lagoon, Napier, on 13 April 1952 (Brathwaite 1955); Taieri Lake, Otago, in January 1969 (Edgar *et al.* 1969); Waitohu Stream, Otaki, in November 1972 (P. C. Bull *in* Edgar 1973); two birds at Cooper's Lagoon, Lake Ellesmere, in January 1973 (R. J. Pierce *in* Edgar 1973); and one also seen by R. J. Pierce at Lake Tekapo on 31 December 1983 & 1 January 1984.

Japanese Snipe have been confirmed from Norfolk Island (Moore 1981) and Lord Howe Island (J. L. McKean *in litt.*). Probable sightings on Macquarie Island were reported by Gwynne (1953) and Warham (1969).

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