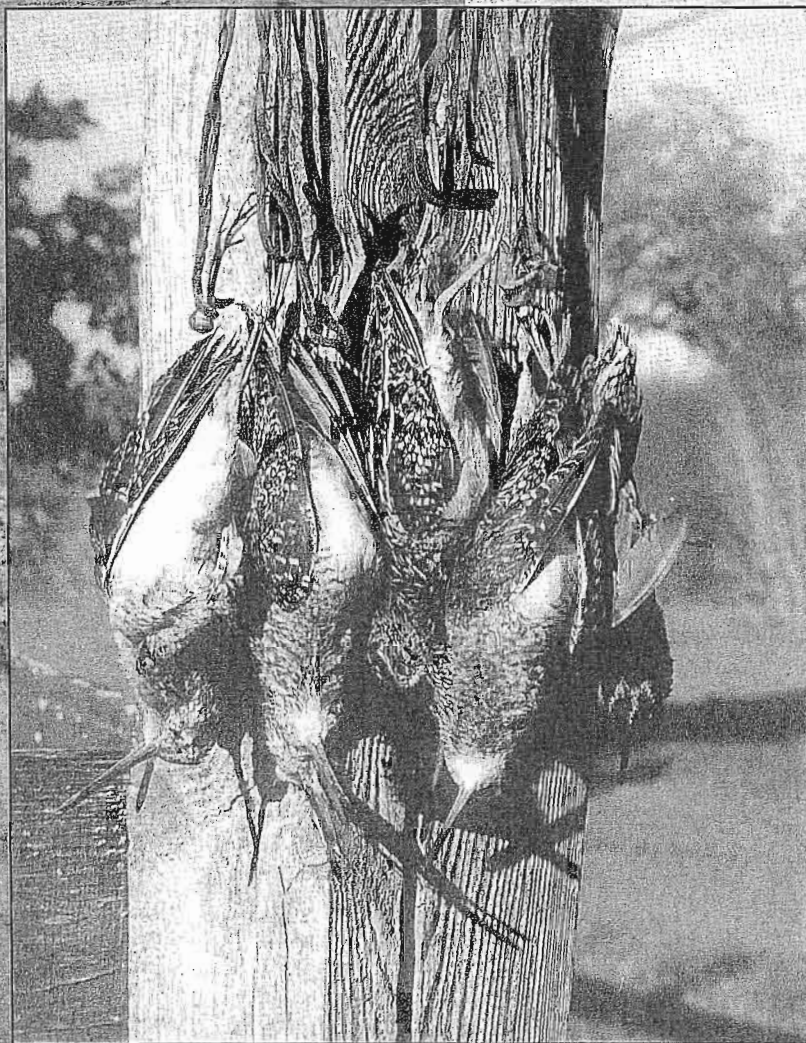


Toughest Target of All:

THE SNIPE

by Billy Gianquinto

Photos by the author



I couldn't help shaking my head in disbelief as we walked through the dry field covered with calf-high grass. They weren't supposed to be there, but they were. Bird after bird flushed at our feet, twisting, darting, zigzagging, and flying at what seemed like 100 miles per hour. "What's wrong with you guys? Can't you hit 'em?" I said with a smile.

"These things are hard to hit," they replied.

I told them before the hunt that snipe were the hardest birds to bag anywhere in the United States. My hunting partners that day were truly convinced.

My first experience with snipe was 43 years ago as a youngster watching television in San Francisco. The Disney-produced "Spin and Marty" television show featured snipe hunts on the program. While on camping trips, Spin would send two unsuspecting kids out in the woods with a gunnysack and a flashlight looking for the non-existent snipe. Sort of a camp tradition. A wild goose chase.

The snipe is an elusive target that challenges even veteran shotgunners.

My first encounter with the real Mr. Snipe came in 1965 while quail hunting outside of Petaluma in a wooded ditch behind the old roadhouse (the Washoe House, circa 1858). As we were walking along the ditch we came upon a boggy area about 20 yards long. Suddenly about 15 weird-looking, odd-sounding, screeching birds exploded from the bog, zigzagging away from us. I couldn't believe it when my long time hunting partner, Tommy Zunino, said they were snipe. "There really is such a thing as snipe?" I asked him.

"Yeah," he replied. "Do you want to hunt them?"

"You bet, if I can hit 'em," I said. We never touched a feather on that first snipe hunt, but I was hooked.

Common snipe (*Capella gallinago*), formerly known as Wilson's snipe, are members of the sandpiper family. They are a sleek-looking bird with mottled brown feathers, white breast, a slender four-inch-long beak, and four-to-five-inch legs. They frequent shores, marshes, and saturated fields, foraging by inserting their long beaks into the mud, eating insects, small crustaceans, worms, and other invertebrates. They are very similar to woodcock, but are smaller and fly faster and more erratically than their eastern cousins. As table fare, they're delicious. I don't even season them. I just bake them whole for 18 minutes at 350 degrees. They have a distinct, sweet flavor, but getting them into the oven is the tough part.

Depending on the hunting area, snipe will generally flush 10 to 30 yards out, making them a distant target. Add the zigzag and, well, you get the picture. You have to be a good shot. I believe they're the toughest target of all. They're faster than dove, smaller than quail, and their erratic flight makes fools of even the best scattergunners.

Snipe migration patterns follow other Pacific Flyway waterfowl, and they usually show up in great numbers during November, December, and January. You can hunt snipe alone or with a group and spreading out similar to pheasant hunting. Snipe seem to frequent boggy, cow-trodden fields. Find these fields, and you'll find snipe. Most duck club members don't extensively hunt them for fear of spooking the ducks during the season.

Though new waterfowlers think of snipe hunting as I once did—as a walk through the woods with a gunnysack and a flashlight—there is nothing more fun and challenging than an old-fashioned

snipe hunt when the birds are thick.

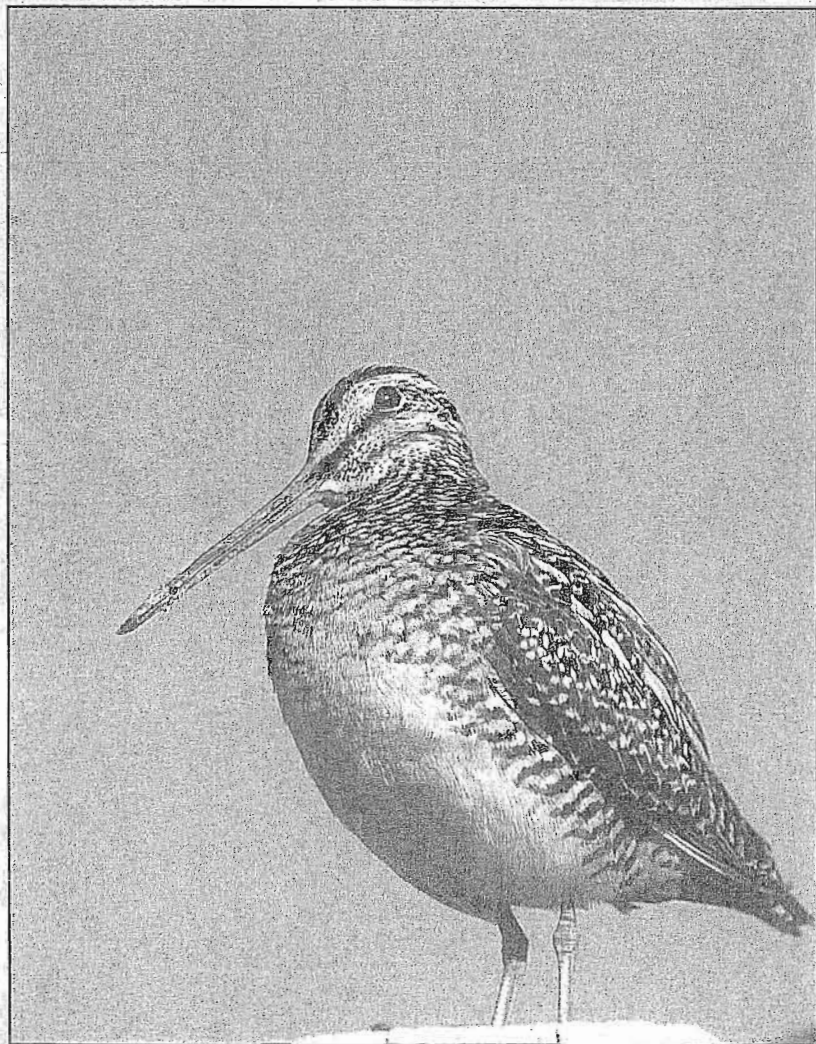
Here are a few important hunting tips that make the task of getting snipe a little easier: Rubber boots are a must. A 12 or 20 gauge is ideal. I like to handicap myself, so I like the 28. Use #9 shot, because one or two pellets will usually do the job. Don't use a dog unless you keep him at heel. A ranging dog will spook the birds. Mark downed birds and retrieve them immediately; otherwise you will lose birds because they will blend in so well. Always hunt upwind and don't talk. Snipe have excellent hearing. Try to hunt five to eight-inch deep grassy bogs or saturated fields, concentrating on the low spots: Generally, in this situation the birds will flush at your feet. This is when snipe shooting is at its best. After hunting one field, hunt another field

and then come back to the first. Snipe always seem to come back after about an hour. One important point: Bring plenty of shells because you'll need them.

Snipe hunting is challenging, fun, and out of the ordinary. So next duck season, don't be a duck-hunting snob and forget about Mr. Snipe. Get out and experience Mr. Snipe, and you'll agree that he's the toughest target of all. ❀

Editor's Note: Check regulations for steel shot requirements.

Billy Gianquinto has been a professional caller for 28 years. He has authored a series of videos and cassettes on calling and waterfowling.



Snipe use their long beaks to probe for worms, crustaceans, and other invertebrates.

Photo by Gary Kramer

Background Photo: Grassy bogs or saturated fields will attract snipe.