

Snipe—the true harbingers of spring

by Ted Bailey

Although some consider the sight of a robin to be one of the first signs spring has arrived, my favorite harbinger of spring is a bird that I often hear before I actually can see it circling high overhead. Although it may take a moment of carefully scanning the sky I eventually can locate the bird with its long bill circling high overhead. Its characteristic winnowing sound is a sure sign spring has finally arrived. I am describing the territorial display sound made by the common snipe as it circles climbing and diving around its territory over and over again, especially in the late evening hours.

This characteristic sound produced by the snipe is known as “winnowing” and sounds like a tremulous “hu-hu-hu.” The sound is not produced by the snipe’s vocal cords but instead is made as the snipe dives steeply in the air and briefly extends its outer tail feathers. When the snipe’s diving airspeed reaches about 37 miles per hour, the air rushing by the outer tail feathers produces the winnowing sound. Most male snipe usually arrived on the Kenai Peninsula by April 30 and are followed 10 to 14 days later by the females. The male selects an attractive area of wetlands—bogs, fens and swamps—and circles over it again and again, driving away other males and possibly attracting females to his area with his highly conspicuous display.

My wife and I are fortunate to live near wetlands because wood frogs, yellowlegs, snipe and other birds annually serenade us. If you do not live near wetlands, you probably miss out on the snipe’s comforting sounds that insures us that winter indeed is finally over. This year we heard our first displaying snipe near our home on April 23. Four days later, I watched one snipe aggressive escort another—presumably another male—out of its territory. On April 28 and 29 I observed the male as he sat at the top of a black spruce tree periodically giving his vocal “chipper” breeding

calls. And on May 5, I flushed two snipe that remained close together—presumably a male and female—and I assume she will be building a nest nearby.

Snipe have several unique characteristics. Their eyes are set so far back on their heads that they have binocular vision behind them; it is virtually impossible to sneak up behind a feeding snipe. Like other shorebirds snipe have long bills with sensory pits near the tip for detecting invertebrates underground. Their beaks are very flexible and the tip can be opened and closed while it is thrust underground with no movement at the bill’s base. Their food is mainly insect larvae of the fly family (crane flies, deer flies, etc.), but also includes damselflies, dragonflies, ants, beetles, earthworms, small snails and other small prey.

Usually four eggs are laid in a nest built solely by the female in or near wetlands. Only the female tends the eggs and young while they are in the nest, but when the nestlings are ready to leave the nest, the male will care of the first two that hatch and the female cares for the remaining hatchlings: no further contact is made between the adults.

Snipe begin to migrate south in August. In Eastern and Central North America snipe spend winters in the southern United States, Central America and northern South America. Snipe breeding in Alaska may spend the winter along the Pacific Coast from Kodiak Island to Cordova, southeast Alaska and along the coast of British Columbia. Come spring, snipe are one of the earliest migrants to arrive on the Kenai Peninsula—true harbingers of spring.

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