



Labrador's Common Snipe

A review of Canada's only record of Common Snipe

Matt Holder and Jeremiah Trimble

The American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) recently published their decision to regard American populations of Common Snipe as distinct (Banks et al. 2002). What was once the North American subspecies *Gallinago gallinago delicata* has been elevated to species status *G. delicata* and given the English name Wilson's Snipe, while the Old World taxon retains the English and scientific names of Common Snipe and *G. gallinago*, respectively. As a result of this split, the Birders Journal *List of Canadian Birds* was updated, and a decision was made to retain the Old World's Common Snipe on the List based on a historical specimen record from Labrador (Holder 2003). This article provides background and a description of Canada's only record of Common Snipe.

History of the Record

The record upon which we are basing our decision to retain Common Snipe on the List is of a specimen retained by Oliver L. Austin, Jr. He purchased the skin from a First Nations woman at Makkovik, who had shot the bird near her winter home at the head of Jack Lane Bay on December 24, 1927 (Austin 1932). Unbelievably, Austin also purchased a skin of a Jack Snipe *Lymnocyptes minimus* from the same woman, who claimed she had shot the Jack Snipe at the same time and place as the Common Snipe. Both of these specimens were deposited in the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University (MCZ) and remain extant (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1. Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* specimen from Labrador (MCZ 140302). First published BJ 12(1): 32. (Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University).



Figure 2. Jack Snipe *Lymnocyptes minimus* specimen from Labrador (MCZ 140303). (Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University).

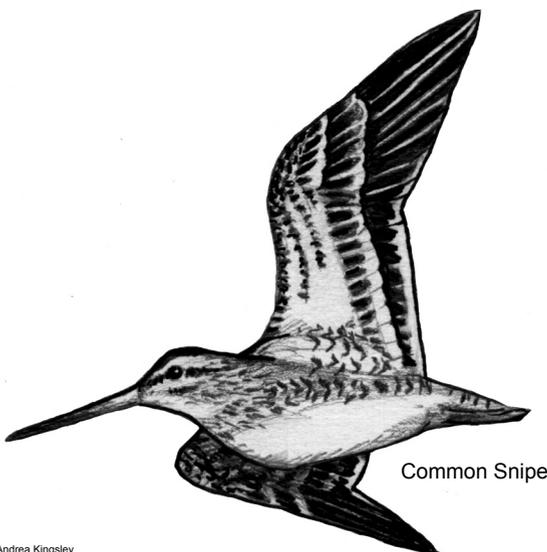
What is the likelihood that a European Common Snipe and a Jack Snipe would occur at the same place and time? Could there have been some confusion as to dates, times, and locations? Could the specimens have come from somewhere else, perhaps given to the local woman by a traveller from Europe? Possibly. However, there is evidence that gives credence to this almost unbelievable occurrence. During the week before Christmas in 1927, strong east winds blew across the Atlantic from Europe, and these winds were thought to be responsible for the large numbers of vagrant Northern Lapwings *Vanellus vanellus* that occurred throughout Atlantic Canada and into Maine (Todd 1963). Accounts from local people describe flocks of Northern Lapwings all along the coast, numbering anywhere from ten to fifty birds per flock, from Battle Harbour north to Hopedale (Austin 1932). This invasion occurred during a very mild spell in the week leading up to Christmas, but all were thought to have perished during the sharp drop in temperatures that occurred the following week. With this invasion of lapwings, it should not be surprising that other European birds, such as Common Snipe and Jack Snipe, would be found at the same time. Indeed, one might expect that many other European birds would have shown up on our shores during that invasion, but were never recorded. With this well-documented invasion of Northern Lapwings across Newfoundland, Labrador, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Maine (Todd (1963), which coincided with the collection date of the Common Snipe, it certainly seems likely that the specimen's collection data were recorded correctly.

Identification of Common Snipe

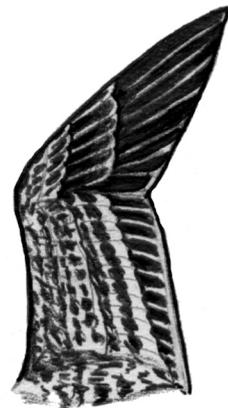
The identification of snipes has been fodder for many discussions and published articles, especially in recent years when birders have turned their focus onto this subject. Different elements of snipe structure and plumage have been discussed as potential identification features, and we briefly summarise some of the recent thinking on the separation of Common Snipe from Wilson's Snipe in the table.

The difference most often quoted as the distinguishing feature is the number of tail feathers, although the variability observed in this feature does not allow it to be diagnostic.

Feature	Wilson's Snipe <i>G.delicata</i>	Common Snipe <i>G.gallinago</i>
Structure		
Number of Tail Feathers	Usually 16, but sometimes 14	Usually 14, but sometimes as few as 12 or as many as 18
Shape of Outer Tail Feathers	Parallel-sided, squared off tip, width <= 9mm	Broadest at middle, rounded tip, width >9mm
Plumage Pattern and Colour		
General Upperparts	Colder tone than Common, influenced by paler and narrower edges to the mantle and scapulars	Warmer toned, with broader and creamier edges to mantle and scapulars
General Underparts	Whiter background to underparts	Creamier background to underparts, with buffier flanks and breast
Supercilium	Broadening in front of eye, narrower behind eye	Overall, more even width
Underwing Coverts	Lesser and median underwing coverts heavily barred with black	Lesser and median underwing coverts spotted with black, much more white visible in flight
Axillaries	Heavily barred with black, more black than white	Barred with black, but with more white than black
Secondaries	Thinner trailing edge to wing	Broad white trailing edge to wing caused by secondary wing tips, noticeable in flight
Based on information in the following sources:	Bland (1998, 1999), Carey and Olsson (1995), Hayman et al. (1986) and email correspondence through Frontiers of Bird Identification	



Common Snipe



Wilson's Snipe

There are a number of other features that have been highlighted as potential identification features, but the variability exhibited by these snipes prevents any one feature from being diagnostic. Further discussion of potential identification features may be found in Bland (1998, 1999), Carey (1992), Carey and Olsson (1995), Leader (1999). Additionally, several excellent websites are available that discuss the separation of Wilson's and Common Snipes, including those created by Martin Reid www.martinreid.com and Angus Wilson www.oceanwanderers.com.

As for the Labrador specimen (MCZ 140302), MH contacted JT to determine if the specimen was still extant and to quickly check its identification prior to updating the *List of Canadian Birds*. JT's initial review of the specimen raised some eyebrows. Firstly, a quick count of the tail feathers indicated there were 13, so at least one and maybe more feathers were missing. Secondly, a quick look at the underwing coverts showed them to be heavily marked with black, directing thoughts toward Wilson's Snipe. Thirdly, the width of the outer tail feathers was measured to be 8mm, below the threshold reported to separate Common Snipe from Wilson's Snipe. Could it be that the specimen was misidentified? Further investigation was certainly warranted.

JT proceeded to take the time to carefully examine the specimen, comparing it to specimens of both Wilson's Snipe and Common Snipe found in the MCZ collection. Despite the initial and quick review, it became apparent that the Labrador specimen was indeed a Common Snipe. The age was deemed to be Hatch-Year, due to the presence of a few juvenile wing coverts in amongst the predominantly adult feathers. The overall tone of the bird is warmer and much more like the other Common Snipes in the collection. Although it is difficult to see the lower breast pattern due to the condition of the specimen, the diffuse markings on a buffy/beige background are highly suggestive of Common Snipe (Figure 3). The underprimary coverts appear quite dark, but further examination of the other underwing coverts by gently teasing the wings open showed that many of the undermedian coverts are white with some gray barring, indicative of Common Snipe (Figure 4). The axillaries are strongly barred, but the white bars are wider than the black bars, which is again suggestive of Common Snipe (Figure 4). The secondaries are broadly tipped with white, creating a wide and noticeable trailing edge to the wing, which matched what is shown by other Common Snipe specimens in the MCZ collection. Finally, the tail feather shape is rounded, identical to the tail feathers of other Common Snipes in the collection (Figure 5). The slightly narrower than expected outer tail feathers were real (measured by three separate observers), but could be due to feather wear.

It appears that this specimen indeed represents the first and only record of Common Snipe for Canada. The identification of the species is very difficult, however, and it is likely that Common Snipe has occurred more frequently in Canada than this single record suggests. Apart from the likelihood of European vagrants occurring in Atlantic Canada, Common Snipes from Asian populations are found regularly in Alaska, and there is the potential that vagrants from this source may occur in western Canada. Birders should be on the lookout for this species in North America, but they must be extremely careful and consider all of the many identification features because of the difficulty of separating Common Snipe from Wilson's Snipe in the field.



Figure 3. Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* specimen from Labrador (MCZ 140302). (Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University).



Figure 4. Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* specimen from Labrador (MCZ 140302). First published BJ 12(1): 32. (Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University).



Figure 5. Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* specimen from Labrador (MCZ 140302). First published BJ 12(1): 32. (Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University).

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