

COMMENTS AND NOTES ON A SIGHT RECORD
OF THE GREAT SNIPE AT
CAPE MAY POINT, NEW JERSEY

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Our party of ten¹ birders was looking for fall migrants the morning of September 7, 1963, on an all-day birding trip starting from Wilmington, Delaware, about 5:00 A.M., EDST. We proceeded promptly to Cape May, New Jersey, with only a stop or two en route to examine a hawk or confirm some other sighting.

Serious birding commenced at Cape May around the area of Lily Lake, where by about 9:00 A.M. we had progressed to the southeast shore. We had stopped to examine several Stilt Sandpipers which were feeding in their characteristic manner of irregular dipping. Suddenly one of our party noticed a bird up on the dry sand, about five feet from the water, which was shaped in profile very much like a Woodcock. No self-respecting Woodcock should have been sitting out in the open, and moreover, examination revealed head stripes rather than bars. The extremely heavy barring underneath, coupled with the more Woodcock-like appearance (large head and heavy-based long bill) started an argument about the bird's identity. The entire group was convinced that the bird was a snipe, but that it was not the Common Snipe. No one thought of the Great Snipe at that time. Three of the party were familiar with European birds, but none had ever seen the Great Snipe in Europe.

By some stroke of good fortune I had along my Bolex Rex 16 camera, loaded with Kodachrome II film. I approached the bird cautiously and in stages, using the 150 mm. lens for all sequences. Finally the bird moved, and a four-frame sequence caught the bird leaving the field of view. The clearest frame of the latter sequence plus one of the best from the sequences where the bird was stationary have been enlarged to 35-mm. transparencies. In both of these, as well as in the movie, one can see the extensive white of the outer tail feathers and the heavy barring of the breast and sides.

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After completing our trip and studying reference books later that night, five of us, close enough to communicate by telephone, expressed opinions about the unusual snipe. The telephone conversations went something like this:

"Hal, did you check out that shore bird?"

"Yes."

"What did you decide about its identity?"

"Well, Karl, I have a pretty good idea what it is. Have you?"

"Yes, but go ahead and comment to see if we are in agreement."

"I'll stick my neck out by saying it is a European Great Snipe and hope that the movie will show the white in the tail."

Karl Weber and Winston Wayne said that they, too, had reached the same conclusions. Upon contacting C. S. Marvel and other available observers the next day, I found that they had independently made the same identification.

During the following few weeks it was possible to review the movie and slides with the help of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club and to compare them with specimens in the Academy of Natural Sciences. The following observations were made:

1. That in a given specimen of the Wilson's (or Common) Snipe (*Capella gallinago*) the bill may be long; however, no specimen of the Wilson's Snipe exhibited a heavy bill at the base, comparable to that seen in the movie. In fact, only in a museum specimen of the African subspecies of the Great Snipe (*Capella media*) were there bill characteristics matching those of the bird at Cape May.
2. Regarding the barring on the flanks which are evident in the movie, no Wilson's Snipe specimen in the Academy showed a combination of large bill and heavily barred underparts.
3. Finally, the primary distinguishing mark of *Capella media*, the white outer margin of the tail, can be seen in the photo. While the coloration of the outer retrices of the Wilson's Snipe specimens was somewhat variable, no specimen of *Capella gallinago* exhibited extensive white on the tail together with heavily barred underparts and a large heavy bill.

Taking these three characteristics from photographic evidence, the white in the tail together with heavily barred underparts and a large heavy bill, we conclude that this bird which we observed at Cape May and recorded in the movie was in fact a Great Snipe. We would recognize the difficulties in proposing a firm and positive identification based on photographs particularly if colors were important, because it is well known that in the reproduction of color the contrast is increased and thus color shades can be thrown off. It should be noted that in drawing the conclusion from the photographs that this bird was a Great Snipe, we have considered only presence or absence of markings and characters. Copies of the movie and transparencies have been submitted to the Smithsonian Institution for file.

To identify from photos a bird so little known as the Great Snipe, it was suggested by David A. Cutler that we seek a number of opinions from those who know the bird. We were heartened to receive prompt and thoughtful replies to all our requests for assistance. Comments were received from Alexander Wetmore, Research Associate, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; R. T. Peterson, National Audubon Society, New York, N.Y.; I.C.T. Nisbet, Department of Physics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and Tandlåkare P.O. Swanberg, Skara den Skaraborgsgatan 9, Sweden. The concensus of all these individual considerations again lead us to the conclusion that we saw a Great Snipe. We quote their answers below pertinent to the identification:

Dr. Alexander Wetmore:

"I have made several careful examinations of the color transparencies sent me with your letter of November 7, and am pleased to write that so far as I may ascertain the bird appears to be the Great Snipe, *Capella media*. The species is one of wide range in Europe and western Asia, and as a migrant winters in Africa, south of the Sahara.

Your transparency shows the white outer margin of the tail that marks this bird, and also the large bill. With a record of this kind, in a group with a number of species all generally similar in appearance, it is difficult to be absolutely certain. I may rule out at once, however, the Ethiopian Snipe or African Great Snipe which is generally similar in form but is white on the abdomen and flanks, without the heavy barring of the true Great Snipe. Also the African bird has the outer web of the outer primary white clear out to the tip, while in the Great Snipe this area is dark. The two are often confused in Africa during the period when the Great Snipe is there in winter.

Your individual was sitting out in the open, which no self-respecting snipe should do. This should indicate that he was a stranger, as yours appeared to be, and not familiar with the mores of his group in this part of the world!

In brief, I believe you have seen the Great Snipe, *Capella media*, but I would counsel you to guard carefully the transparencies since you may be called upon to demonstrate this fact. The two transparencies with their magnification are much more satisfactory than the motion picture film. If this record is accepted by those who will handle details for the next edition of the A.O.U. Checklist, this is the first report of the Great Snipe in North America."¹

Dr. Roger Tory Peterson's comments on Dr. Wetmore's:

"The heavy barring is also typical of the Great Snipe. It looks good to me. Congratulations!"

I.C.T. Nisbet:

"I have now examined the film several times, but I am reluctant to give a positive identification of the bird — partly because I have little first-hand experience with the Great Snipe (which has now become a very rare bird in Europe),

¹ Author's footnote: It has recently come to my attention that in "The Water Fowl Family" (L. C. Sanford, L. R. Bishop, and T. S. Van Dyke, The MacMillan Co., New York, 1903) there is a record cited of a specimen taken at Hudson Bay sometime prior to 1830.

partly because it is a very difficult species to identify in life, and partly because the characters of your bird do seem somewhat equivocal:

1. The film clearly shows conspicuous white in the outer tail-feather, which is the best character of the species, but I should point out that the Common Snipe also has *some* white in the outer tail-feather (illustration in the Handbook of British Birds, IV:196) and that the film does not show the pattern on these feathers clearly.
2. The film shows conspicuous whitish tips to the wing-coverts, another important character of the Great Snipe.
3. Against this, the buff stripes on the back seem more conspicuous than is normal on a Great Snipe.
4. I am also worried by the length of the bill: In spite of Wetmore's comment, the bill of *G. media* is both absolutely and relatively shorter than that of *G. gallinago*. I suggest that you should measure the relative lengths of bill and head from your still photographs and compare them with a selection of photographs of both species."

Mr. T.P.O. Swanberg:

- "a) The *length of the bill* compared with the size of the head corresponds far better with the Common Snipe than with the Great Snipe. On the other hand the *base of the bill* looks as stout as in the Great Snipe. The color of the bill agrees with both those species.
- b) *The back and the head*. It is not possible to show to what extent the film gives the true shades of the colors. Thus it is difficult to decide the species as to the back plummage. I suppose the color well agrees with that of the Wilson's Snipe too.
- c) *The flanks* are barred with black or blackish streaks in a way that is typical for the Great Snipe. The barring continues to the tibia as in that species (not so in the Common Snipe). Such barring is the second best distinctive attribute after the more or less white outer tail feathers. Indeed, I suppose that the Wilson's Snipe (Ed - here spoken of in its subspecific classification) has the flanks barred more than the Common Snipe! I have no experience of *Gallinago delicata*.
- d) *The tail*. The white tips correspond well to the Great Snipe but, as Nisbet already stated, the Common Snipe may have whitish tips and white tips are said to be characteristic for the Wilson's Snipe."

I am greatly indebted to the above-mentioned people for their careful review of this record and in particular to Mr. David Cutler of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club who gave special assistance in seeking confirmation of this record.

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