

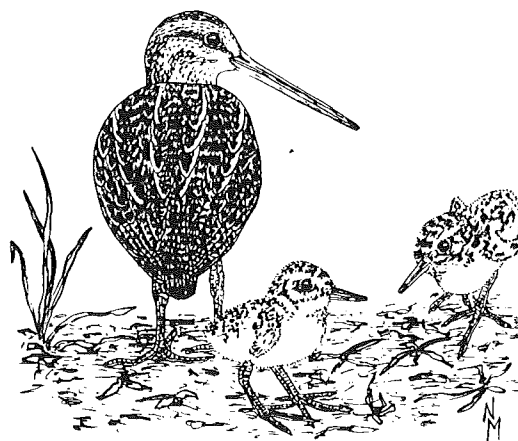
Common Snipe

Gallinago gallinago

The winnowing aerial display of the Common Snipe is a characteristic summer sound on its Arctic tundra nesting grounds; the species also breeds in marshes and wet meadows as far south as West Virginia in the East and California in the West. Even so, many Vermont Atlas Project observers were surprised to discover that breeding snipe were widely distributed throughout the state in suitable habitat. Snipe are commonly encountered on shores and marshes during the spring and fall, but are less often observed during the summer while engaged in raising their young. These birds breed in Vermont in the same marshlands where one would expect to find them during migration, but may also be found throughout the state in wet meadows—the wetter and wider the better.

Male Common Snipe return to Vermont early, usually by the last week in March, some two weeks before the females. Males commence their aerial displays soon after arriving. Although they may continue to display through June, displaying activity peaks shortly after the females arrive. Displays may be heard at any time of day, but are most likely at dusk and on moonlit nights. The eerie, wavering, winnowing sound, frequently heard before the bird is seen, is produced by wind rushing through the narrowed outer tail feathers as the bird plunges toward the ground. The wavering quality is the result of changes in air speed apparently modulated by the birds' wings (Tuck 1972). Both sexes can winnow, but males do so more frequently. Copulation, which occurs on the ground, is preceded by a strutting display with fanned tails. Aerial displays may continue after pairs are formed, and unpaired birds may continue to winnow into the summer. Most (55%) records for the Vermont Atlas Project are of birds engaged in aerial displays.

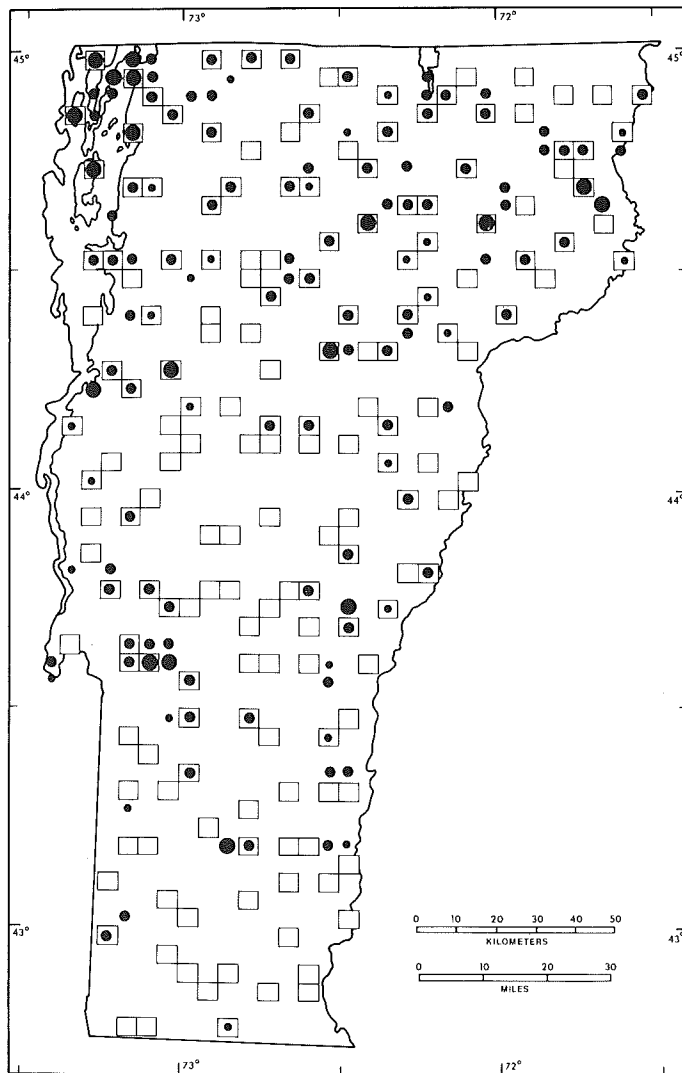
Like the American Woodcock, the Common Snipe is a ground nester, but it prefers moister, more open breeding grounds than



its upland, woodland cousin. The clutch of 4 heavily blotched, buff eggs is started in a mere scrape. The nest is gradually added to as laying progresses, but even upon completion it is anything but substantial. Incubation, the female's responsibility, takes about 19 days. The male continues to display during incubation, but once the eggs hatch he cares for part of the brood. The young, though precocial, are fed for the first 10 days by the parents, who probe in moist soil for animal matter with their long bills (Tuck 1972). The young elicit feeding by pecking at their parents' bills. More than 80% of the Common Snipe's diet is animal matter. The young are first able to fly at 2 weeks of age, but are not capable of sustained flight until nearly 3 weeks old.

Snipe are noted for their knack of remaining concealed in seemingly barren marshlands until the last moment, when they burst off in rapid, zigzagging flight. Fall migration commences in August, with most birds heading south by the second week in November. Snipe are hardy birds, often lingering about marshy springs until freezing weather forces them to retreat south. An occasional individual may even successfully overwinter in Vermont. Common Snipe typically winter from the southern U.S. into northern South America.

Although historically considered uncommon in Vermont (Perkins and Howe 1901), the Common Snipe is currently a widespread breeder in the state, particularly in



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 86 (63%)

Possible breeding: 18 (21% of total)

Probable breeding: 57 (66% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 11 (13% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	25	80	29
Green Mountains	16	30	19
North Central	17	89	20
Northeast Highlands	8	50	9
East Central	6	32	7
Taconic Mountains	9	56	10
Eastern Foothills	5	21	6

the North Central region and the Champlain Lowlands. Snipe were least frequently encountered in the Eastern Foothills, the East Central region, and the Green Mountains, where the lack of open land and the steep slopes keep the species from breeding. In general, however, Common Snipe may be expected to breed in small numbers wherever suitable open wetlands can be found. Although it is a gamebird, the snipe receives little hunting pressure in Vermont. Only the abandonment of pastureland is likely to affect the species adversely in the foreseeable future.

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