



Above: A secretive, long-billed wader, most obvious in its zig-zag flight when flushed, or in its 'drumming' display.

Numbers of breeding snipe have declined as a result of increased drainage, and the improvement of grassland and moorland. Across the UK, snipe distribution declined by 19% between the early 1970s and the early 1990s*. In parts of upland southern Scotland, numbers fell by 56% between the early 1980s and 1998, although there is evidence of a recovery since the mid 90s. A high proportion of the snipe present in the winter breed in Eastern Europe, Scandinavia or Iceland.

* Data source: British Trust for Ornithology

WHAT DO SNIPE NEED?

Wet and marshy ground, and tall vegetation for nesting from April to July

Snipe nest in mires and bogs, on wet moorland, rough wet grassland with rushes, sedges and tussocks, and in the marshy margins of wetlands. Nesting attempts will continue just so long as the ground remains sufficiently soft for the birds to probe in search of food.

Soft, damp soil and ground invertebrates throughout the year

The snipe feeds mainly on earthworms, leatherjackets, beetles in livestock dung, and the caterpillars of moths and butterflies. Young chicks are fed by their parents mainly on earthworms in suitable areas close to nesting sites. Both the male and the female help to feed their chicks.

HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE SNIPE?

On moorland

- Avoid conversion (by liming, fertilising and re-seeding) to improved grassland.

Wet areas, ditches and drains

- Protect or create wide margins with a mosaic of vegetation height by moderate grazing from late summer.
- Wet flushes, boggy areas and wet, rough grassland should be preserved or created by avoiding or minimising new drainage, and by blocking grips and drains where feasible.
- Maintaining damp, soft, ground through into July will allow snipe to re-nest if previous attempts have failed.

On in-bye, pasture and marginal ground

- Unimproved or species-rich pasture should be managed with no, or very limited, use of inorganic fertiliser. Where fertilisers are used, phased-release and leach-resistant types avoid excessive growth and allow application during the autumn rather than the nesting season. Organic (and organic-based) fertilisers (especially cow dung) tend to increase soil invertebrate numbers, which makes for better feeding.

- If rushes/vegetation for snipe becomes too thick, cutting narrow access tracks across the direction of the prevailing wind to provide shelter can provide attractive autumn/winter habitat.
- An absence of grazing by cattle (or, if necessary, a maximum of two livestock units per hectare) from mid-March to the end of July minimises the loss of nests by trampling.
- Grazing by cattle, particularly beef livestock, from late summer onwards will provide a tussocky sward that will attract nesting snipe the following spring. The invertebrates in cattle dung are also an important source of food. Remember to adjust your grazing rates to compensate for any reduced grazing in the spring.

Nesting habitat

- Semi improved or unimproved damp grassland, marshy ground mires, bogs or wet moorland are all used for mating sites.

Summer food

- Primarily soil invertebrates located by probing soft soil wherever this is available.

Winter food

- Soil invertebrates, as in summer. Although a greater range of habitats are suitable in winter as the soil tends to be wetter.

KEY POINTS

- Avoid or limit drainage, and block existing drains and grips where feasible.

CATTLE GRAZING

- Graze unimproved pasture with cattle from late summer to late winter to produce a tussocky sward.

WET AREAS

- Retain unimproved pasture, especially wet areas.

See also the RSPB Scotland advisory sheets on:

- Lapwing
- Curlew
- Redshank
- Wet grassland for waders
- Managing water levels to benefit birds
- Rush management.

Contacts and advice

The best way to help snipe on your farm/croft is to walk the ground with an adviser and discuss options for management and funding. Much of the management suggested in this leaflet can be funded by agri-environment schemes.

For answers to all of your farm wildlife enquiries, visit www.farmwildlife.info

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You can get further information on this and other ways of managing your farm for wildlife from:



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