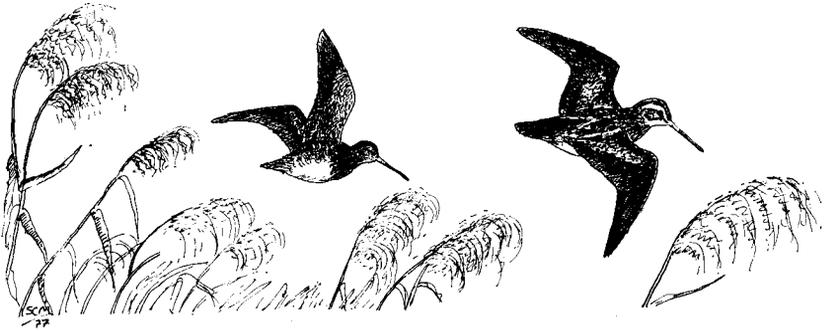


# Field identification of Pintail Snipe

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## The Pintail Snipe has not yet been recorded in Britain and Ireland, but has it been overlooked?

**T**he genus *Gallinago* provides observers with difficulties in field identification, chiefly because of the rather similar general plumage patterns of snipes and their singularly awkward habits: most views being of flushed birds flying away from the observer. Difficulties generally arise between large-looking Snipe *G. gallinago* and Great Snipe *G. media* (see Wallace 1976), but emphasis on these two species should not preclude the possibility of other Palearctic snipes, especially the Pintail Snipe *G. stenura*, occurring as vagrants in western Europe.

The inclusion of the Pintail Snipe in a popular European field guide (Heinzel, Fitter and Parslow 1972) has attracted the attention of observers to the species, but the brief description given there is of little use in the field. This paper grew around my field impressions of Pintail Snipe in comparison with Snipe in Nepal in winter 1973/74, and includes notes supplied by T. P. Inskipp (*in litt.*) from India in 1970 and P. A. Dukes (*in litt.*) from Sri Lanka in 1975. We found the distinctions between the two species more striking than has been suggested in the literature,

continued...

although there is clearly scope for more fieldwork to be done on the differences between the Pintail Snipe and the closely allied Swinhoe's Snipe *G. megala*, which is said to be possibly indistinguishable unless in the hand.

### **World distribution**

The Pintail Snipe breeds widely across Siberia, from the western foothills of the Urals east to Anadyrland and the Sea of Okhotsk, north to the southern Yamal Peninsula and about 71° on the Lena, south to the region of Tomsk and northwestern Manchuria. It is a highly migratory species, wintering mainly in the Indian subcontinent and southeastern Asia, with possibly a few in northeastern Africa, where it has been recorded in Somalia and Kenya (Vaurie 1965, Backhurst 1969).

### **Field identification**

#### *On the ground*

The distinctions between the Snipe and the Pintail Snipe on the ground are not so obvious as in flight; if the two species are seen together, however, the Pintail Snipe can be picked out by the buff stripes along the scapulars being narrower and paler, with the areas between them looking browner and more vermiculated, giving a less contrasting appearance to the upper-side. These narrower stripes can appear as separate pale lines, rather than as continuous stripes (TPI). The wing-coverts are duller and less rufous-looking than those of the Snipe, but, in general, separation of these two species on the ground is well-nigh impossible.

#### *In flight*

The distinctions between the two are far more apparent in flight (see fig. 1), with the most obvious and useful character being the Pintail Snipe's lack of white trailing edges to the secondaries, which are present and visible on the upperwing of all Snipe seen well (and also, less obviously, on the underwing): in the hand, the Pintail Snipe exhibits extremely narrow, brownish-white tips to the secondaries, but they are only about 1 mm wide and are invisible in the field. The flight feathers are also browner than those of the Snipe. Seen from above, the whole wing of a rising Pintail Snipe looks dull brownish, with more marked pale buff mottling on the coverts than on those of the Snipe, which looks quite blackish on the flight feathers, with the coverts marked with warm (almost rufous) brown and prominent white tips to the secondaries forming a distinct trailing edge. In exceptional circumstances, it may also be possible to see a whitish outer web to the outermost primary of a rising Snipe, whereas, on a Pintail Snipe, this is brownish-white and offers no contrast: this feature could be useful if a bird were repeatedly flushed at close quarters.

The striping on the scapulars of the Pintail Snipe is less apparent than on the Snipe, and there is a generally more uniform, duller brown appearance to the upper-side. The tip of the wing is also slightly blunter in the Pintail Snipe, giving a rather heavier appearance, which is exaggerated by its heavier flight.

The underside of the wing of the Pintail Snipe is markedly different from that of the nominate race of the Snipe, being closely marked with intense dark barring, giving the whole underwing a uniform dark appearance, a feature which is, however, shared with the American

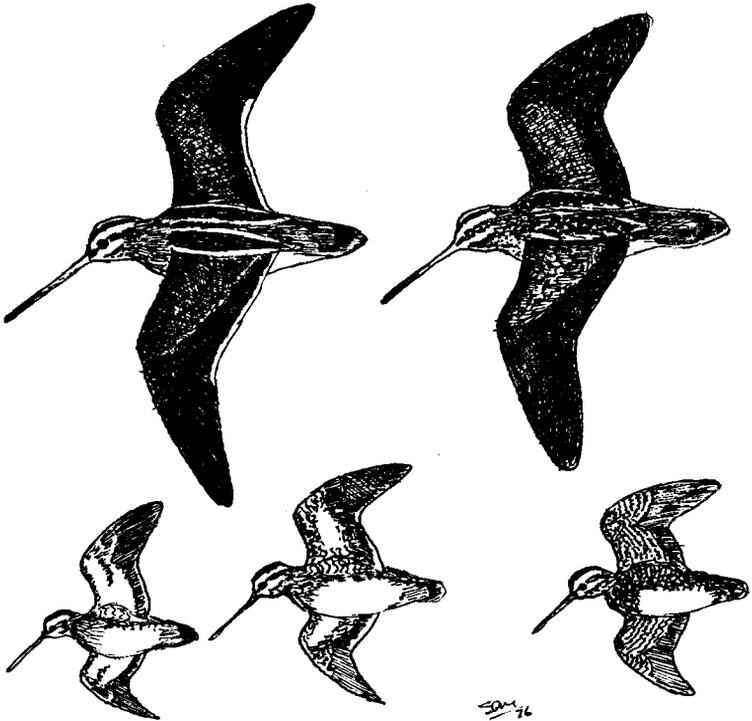


Fig. 1. Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* (left three birds) and Pintail Snipe *G. stenura* (right two). Note variations in underwing pattern of Snipe, but usually showing clear whitish area compared with densely barred underwing of Pintail Snipe. Note also latter's lack of white trailing edge to secondaries, more uniform upperparts and slightly blunter wing tips

subspecies of the Snipe *G. g. delicata*. Snipe of the nominate race, even those with very heavily barred underwings, usually show a clear, unmarked, whitish area towards the centre of the underwing (see fig. 1).

### Habitat and habits

Pintail Snipe breed on the Siberian tundra, in damp areas covered with birches *Betula* and in marshy areas alongside small rivers, and avoid the really dry areas (Dementiev and Gladkov 1969). These are, in fact, probably very similar to the breeding habitats of Snipe in western Europe; the relationships between the snipes on the breeding grounds would make an interesting ecological study.

In their winter quarters in Nepal, the two species were found together in wet, open paddy-fields in the terai—the alluvial plain in the south of

that country. Pintail Snipe observed by PAD in Sri Lanka were again in damp, boggy areas, around the edges of coastal lagoons. Baker (1921), however, considered that Pintail Snipe often preferred dry, open grasslands; it seems that, although both species feed in damp situations, the Pintail Snipe more often frequents drier ground, where it feeds on insects rather than by probing for worms (Ali and Ripley 1969). PAD found it a more approachable bird on the ground than the Snipe, and often watched them feeding out in the open as well as among grazing water buffalo *Bubalus arnee*.

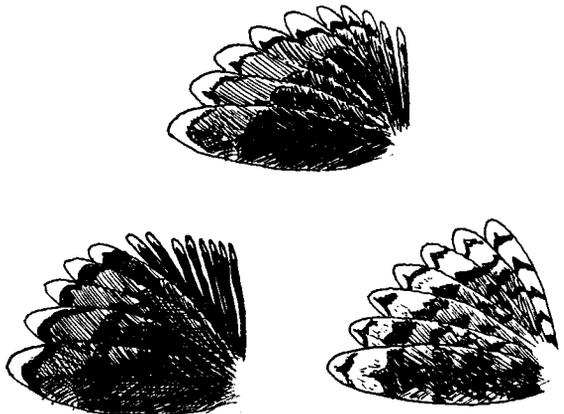
Pintail Snipe tend to sit quite 'close', rising rather like heavy Jack Snipe *Lymnocyptes minimus*, with little or no zigzagging and dropping after a short flight, but sometimes flying steadily for a considerable distance before going to ground. Frequently, they did not 'tower' as Snipe will, although occasionally they climbed high before flying well away. They were often silent, but, when calls were heard from rising birds, the note was markedly similar to that uttered by flushed Snipe, although rather less explosive and possibly weaker: a more abrupt 'charp' or 'scaap'.

### Structure

In general size and shape, the Pintail Snipe resembles the Snipe, but the bill is rather shorter: 57-64 mm (Ali and Ripley 1969) compared with 57-69 mm (Witherby *et al.* 1940); this feature was, however, hardly noticeable in the field in India and Nepal.

The number and shape of the tail feathers are regarded as an acceptable basis for differentiating between species in the hand, and, since snipe are

Fig. 2. Half-tails of Pintail Snipe *Gallinago stenura* (left), Snipe *G. gallinago* (right) and Swinhoe's Snipe *G. megala* (upper). Note number and shape of outer tail feathers, in particular the pin-like feathers of Pintail Snipe



handled for ringing and are still shot in Britain and Ireland, the differences in tail structures are summarised in table 1 and shown in fig. 2. Pintail Snipe have a most distinctive tail consisting of 26 feathers, of which the outer eight or nine pairs are remarkably narrow and pin-like. The closely-related Swinhoe's Snipe has a similar tail, but there are only six or seven

pairs of narrow feathers, which are less pin-like than those of the Pintail Snipe.

### Comparisons with other Palearctic snipes

The differences between Snipe of the nominate race and Pintail Snipe have been summarised above, but consideration must also be given to the six other snipes found in the Palearctic: Solitary *G. solitaria*, Wood *G. nemoricola*, Great, Latham's *G. hardwickii*, Swinhoe's, and Jack. Of these, the Solitary and the Wood are both big birds, larger than the Great Snipe; that last species and the Jack Snipe can also be ruled out on size and by the presence of white trailing edges to the secondaries. Latham's is also a large bird about the size of the Great Snipe, but lacks the white trailing edge to the secondaries; it is very similar to and may even be conspecific with Swinhoe's Snipe, but, since it is confined to Japan as a breeding bird and winters in Australia, it need not worry us here. This leaves Swinhoe's Snipe, which is considered below.

#### *Swinhoe's Snipe*

Swinhoe's Snipe breeds in central Siberia and winters from eastern India to northern Australia; it is probably less likely than the Pintail Snipe to turn up as a vagrant in western Europe, although it has been recorded as a straggler in the northern Caucasus, in December 1898 (Dementiev and Gladkov 1969).

I can find no field description of this species other than the comment that it is very similar to, and perhaps indistinguishable from, the Pintail Snipe. Like that species, the secondaries have exceedingly narrow pale tips and the underside of the wing is densely barred. After examining a series of skins of both species, I suggest that they may be separable by Swinhoe's having broader longitudinal buff stripes on the scapulars, with the areas between these stripes and the mantle being blacker than those of the

**Table 1. Tail structures of snipes *Gallinago***

Summarised from Ali and Ripley 1969, Baker 1921, Dementiev and Gladkov 1969, Henry 1971, King *et al.* 1975 and Witherby *et al.* 1940

	NUMBER OF TAIL FEATHERS		Comments
	Normal	Extremes	
Snipe <i>G. g. gallinago</i>	14	12-18	All broad; <i>G. g. delicata</i> normally has 16 feathers
Great Snipe <i>G. media</i>	16	14-18	All broad
Pintail Snipe <i>G. stenura</i>	26	24-28	Central 10 normal; remainder pin-like; tip of outermost feather 1.0-1.5 mm wide and falling 10-20 mm short of tail tip
Swinhoe's Snipe <i>G. megala</i>	20	20-24	Central 10 normal; remainder grading to become rather pin-like, but less so than Pintail Snipe; tip of outermost feather 2.5-4 mm wide and falling 5-15 mm short of tail tip

Pintail Snipe: this would give Swinhoe's a more contrasting appearance in flight, resembling the Snipe in this respect.

The wing-coverts are as pale as those of the Pintail Snipe, and, on a rising bird, could contrast well with the more boldly striped mantle. Swinhoe's is also a larger bird than the Pintail Snipe, lying between the Snipe and the Great Snipe in size and bulk. In the hand, the distinctive tail structure should be examined (see fig. 2 and table 1) and the bastard wing measured: Pintail Snipe, under 19 mm; Swinhoe's Snipe, over 19 mm (Ali and Ripley 1969).

B. F. King (*in litt.*) considers that, when flushed, Swinhoe's is heavy-looking, with a straighter, non-erratic flight compared with the Pintail Snipe. There may also be a difference in calls, since King *et al.* (1975) described the calls of Swinhoe's as being similar to that of the Snipe 'but slightly higher-pitched and less hoarse' and of Pintail Snipe as a 'rasping, rather nasal *squak*'.

Clearly, there is a need for fieldwork on Swinhoe's Snipe in its winter quarters before anything more concrete can be said about its identification in the field.

#### *Faeroe and American Snipes*

These two subspecies of the Snipe can look odd in the field and it seems pertinent to mention them here. *G. g. faeroensis*, the race breeding in Iceland, the Faeroes, Shetland and Orkney, occurs in winter chiefly in Ireland. Compared with the nominate form, it is distinctly more rufous and vermiculated above, with narrower striping on the scapulars, although it similarly has conspicuous white trailing edges to the secondaries.

The American subspecies *G. g. delicata* has been recorded twice as a vagrant in Britain (but never in Ireland) and is distinguished from the nominate race by normally having 16 tail feathers and by being very dark and densely barred on the underwing, with very dark upperparts; skins that I examined also had narrower white tips to the secondaries than the nominate form. Thus, the densely barred underwing and narrower white trailing edge to the secondaries approach those of the Pintail Snipe, but the generally very dark and prominently striped upperparts would distinguish them.

#### **Acknowledgements**

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#### **Summary**

The Pintail Snipe *Gallinago stenura* could occur as a vagrant in western Europe, but difficulties in field identification would probably cause it to be easily overlooked. Field impressions are described and it is proposed that the species can be separated from the Snipe *G. gallinago* by a combination of lack of white trailing edge to the secondaries, duller, more uniform upperparts, darker, more densely barred underwing and slightly different

call. Attention is also drawn to Swinhoe's Snipe *G. megala*, which is said to be indistinguishable in the field from the Pintail Snipe, and to other subspecies of the Snipe. Since many snipe are handled every year in Britain and Ireland, differences between the three species in the hand, especially tail structure, are also outlined.

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