

Outdoors

No, not that kind of 'snipe hunting'!

Of all the game birds in North America, the only one with which I have a real love-hate relationship is the Common (or Wilson's) snipe, often called "jacksnipe." Snipe are devious, unscrupulous little birds, and they don't play fair.

When you flush one from his marshy playground, does he fly smooth and straight like any honest bird? Not on your life! He zigs and zags like a crippled butterfly in the slipstream of a jet airliner. Trying to get a shotgun on one on takeoff makes tracking a panicked mourning dove look like child's play.

This astoundingly erratic phase of his escape act lasts only a few seconds, after which he utters a loud, derisive "SCA-IPE!" and straightens out. At the same time, the bird usually defecates. An indelicate but useful word of advice for would-be jacksnipe shooters, therefore, is "Don't shoot 'til he chirps and craps."

This as all very well except that, by that time, of course, the rattled gunner is standing there in the mud with an empty gun, saying bad words and watching the bird flutter away unharmed.

Some years ago I was hunting on a lease on a Uvalde County ranch where a major creek emptied into the old Leona River bed. That confluence held the richest Indian camp I've ever seen, where a few hours of searching could produce dozens of flint projectile points, knives, scrapers and other tools. The ranch was a paradise for any outdoorsman, with abundant deer, turkeys and javelinas, and some blue quail. There were several tanks and one big lake loaded with waterfowl in season and holding largemouth bass and bullfrogs galore.

It was the best dove hunting I've ever seen on this side of the Rio Grande, and I once shot a limit of mourning doves on the lake in 10 minutes flat by a stopwatch.

As a year-round bonus, there were bobcats, foxes, raccoons, and ringtails for the amusement of varmint callers.

There were also jacksnipe. One fine morning I noticed a snipe landing on the aforementioned creek, and quickly loaded a light 20-gauge double and stuffed some shells in my pocket. I'd marked the



Photos by John Wootters

Author Wootters gloats over two jacksnipe that he managed not to miss. See text for an understanding of the significance of that.

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bird down very carefully and stalked that spot with the gun at the ready.

When he flushed, I missed him. Twice.

But he flittered only a hundred yards or so and dropped back into the creek bottom. Knowing that I'd be ready for him this time, I moved aggressively to flush him again.

When he flew, I shot too quickly and missed him twice more. Again, he didn't go far, and again I hurried to pin him down and make him fly. He

did, and I missed him again, but only with the left barrel this time. I watched him pitch into a marshy spot 60 yards ahead, grimly reloaded and went after him. No long-billed, five-ounce bundle of feathers was going to make a fool of me!

There's no point in telling the story in detail; even after all these years the memory is too painful. To be brief, I fired at that bird a total of seven times and never ruffled a feather. And I then strolled back to the truck, enjoying the fresh air and sunshine while biting the heads off 20-gauge cartridges and chewing up the shot pellets!

Since then I have hit a few snipe, and have at least not gone oh-and-seven again. But this is still the most challenging bird I face, maybe because he has the psychological edge on me. At the same time, each snipe I actually bag is a great triumph

and morale booster.

Snipe remain plentiful and legal in Texas, with a long season (usually about three months) and generous bag limits, but are still among our most ignored game. They're also quite edible. If you wish to indulge in the frustration of snipe shooting, you'll need to state as much to the license agent when you buy your hunting license so that all applicable Federal migratory game regulations are followed.

Snipe are more common in central and south Texas than most hunters realize, but are usually overlooked. Our recent and, hopefully, continuing rains could foretell a bumper snipe season by flooding shallow margins of stock tanks and low areas along creeks ... if this prime snipe habitat doesn't dry up again before October.

A few rounds of skeet or hand-trapped clays between now and then would not be amiss, either, always remembering that clay targets don't chirp and crap.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the board of the NRA, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.