

Identification of a Wilson's Snipe on Ouessant, Finistère

Vincent Legrand

At about 8.30am on 17th October 2005, I had been waiting for a Sora to show at Ty Crenn marsh on the island of Ouessant, Finistère, France, when I glimpsed a wader amid the reeds. I announced to the several others birders present that it was a Jack Snipe, although virtually all I had seen of it was some very dark scapulars and an almost black cap....

A few minutes later, the bird appeared in the open. It was indeed a snipe but, it was not as small, and its bill was not as short, as I had been expecting. At the sight of the birders, the bird immediately turned back into cover. My reaction was simply, 'Oops, no, it's just a Common Snipe', and I thought nothing more of it.

Two days later, I made another, more determined, attempt to see and photograph the Sora. I arrived at Ty Crenn an hour before dawn and positioned myself in the best spot. I crouched in cover, armed with my camera and 400mm lens on a tripod, and, covered with a camouflage net, I was virtually invisible. After almost an hour, just at first light, a Jack Snipe landed only three

metres away from me – the morning had started well. Then, about five minutes before the usual time of the Sora's appearance, three noisy birders appeared at the site. As a result, the Jack Snipe took off, and so did another snipe that I had not noticed before. The other birders succeeded in scaring the Sora; it did not come out, but my patience was rewarded as the bird passed by, in cover, less than 40cm from me.

Once the other birders had gone, I moved and spent the rest of the morning birding around the site. Just after midday, between two showers, I flushed the same shy snipe once more, but this time I watched it land on a nearby marshy area which was overlooked by a photographic hide. It was raining again and I went round to the hide and installed myself unpleasantly, with my knees in the mud and my back soaked because of leaks in the hide. I stayed, crouching, waiting for the rain to stop. At 12.30pm, I noticed the same snipe sitting among the reeds less than 10metres away. I took a picture of this intriguing snipe, which now looked really rather unusual and, at this moment, I began to wonder if it could be a Wilson's Snipe....

The identification

The bird seemed to show some features of all three of the European snipes: it had the size and structure of a Common Snipe, the contrasting upperparts of a Jack Snipe, and the barred breast and flank pattern of a Great Snipe, but really it was none of these. Realising that photographs were likely to be the key to the identification, I set about taking as many as possible. I tried to recollect the identification features of the 1998 Wilson's Snipe on the Isles of Scilly, as published in *Birding World* (11: 382-385 & 12: 56-61), but all I could remember was that the important characters were difficult to record in life and that, among the most important things, were the underwing and the tail patterns. After a time, during which the bird did not move, it decided to offer me the chance to obtain the evidence that I needed. Within a period of less than five minutes, I was able to photograph the spread upperwing, underwing, and tail. After more than two hours in the mud, hunger finally forced me to leave the site.

Plate 1. Wilson's Snipe *Gallinago delicata*, Ouessant, Finistère, France, October 2005 (Vincent Legrand). The first for France (although one was reported in Vendée in August 2000).





Plates 2-4. Wilson's Snipe *Gallinago delicata*, Ouessant, Finistère, France, October 2005 (Vincent Legrand). Ian Lewington has commented: 'Note the broadly dark-barred axillaries and underwing, and the narrow white tips to the secondaries, especially on the inner webs. The cold, dark, contrasting appearance of this individual is immediately striking, completely lacking the warmer tones of *G. gallinago*. Further quantitative diagnostic features exhibited include the broadly dark barred flanks on a white ground colour, the extensively dark upper scapulars with relatively limited internal markings and the dark tertials with narrow transverse bars increasing towards the bases. The 'unSnipe-like' expression is a function of the narrower loreal stripe and the broader fore supercilium. The prominently barred outer tail feather - a strong indicator for separate species status - is shown in Plate 2. The suite is complete.'

A number of other birders had seen the bird by now, and all agreed that it looked interesting, although none were able to progress the identification very far. That evening, the interested

birders met in the island's youth hostel to attempt to identify the bird with the help of the *Birding World* description of the Scilly bird (12: 56-61) and the screen on my digital camera.



Plates 5 & 6. Wilson's Snipe *Gallinago delicata*, Ouessant, Finistère, France, October 2005 (Vincent Legrand).

Description

The bird appeared very similar in size and structure to Common Snipe. The most obvious differences, despite the considerable variation in Common Snipe, were its very dark, almost black scapulars (like Jack Snipe), and the patterning of its breast and flanks being reminiscent of Great Snipe.

Head Cold-toned and strikingly contrasting. Dark loreal stripes parallel-shaped. Supercilium very broad in front of eye; much narrower behind it. Outline of a split supercilium (particularly noticeable on left side of head). Forecheek marked with very dark rufous-brown bar and surrounded by white crescent. Rear cheek rufous-brown, lightly streaked darker brown. Area behind eye rufous-brown, lightly streaked darker brown. Median crown stripe straw-white, narrow and contrasting strongly against black-looking crown. Nape spotted with dark brown on a rufous-brown to straw background.

Body Appeared very dark overall, with almost black scapulars and strongly barred flanks like Great Snipe. Mantle pattern typical of Common Snipe but more contrasting. Throat and breast coarsely spotted with cream-colour and pale rufous on very dark chocolate-brown background. Flanks barred very dark grey (almost black) and white; the tone extremely cold and lacking any cream-colour or buff hue. Undertail streaked very dark grey (almost black) on pale rufous background.

Wings Contrasting, with scapulars showing a pattern typical of Common Snipe but darker. Primaries dark grey above and below, with white shaft streaks. Secondaries dark grey with white trailing edge above and below very narrow, unlike that of typical Common Snipe. Tertiaries strongly barred, mostly dark, with pale bars, rufous near the centre of the feathers and becoming paler and off-white near the edges. Scapular pattern typical of Common Snipe, but darker. Upper scapulars, very dark, with narrower and whiter fringes than Common Snipe. Centres of the fore scapulars almost plain black; rearmost ones with some rufous, V-shaped marks. Three first lower scapulars with white fringes similar to those on upper scapulars and neat pattern. Two rearmost visible lower scapulars with much narrower white fringes. Wing coverts rather

homogeneous, with very dark grey background colour and each feather ending with a white terminal fringe, creating pale lines on dark wing. Axillaries coarsely marked with open V-shaped black and white bars, the black bars being broader than the white bars; absolutely no buff tone in this area. Lesser and median underwing-coverts and marginal coverts uniformly barred black and white, without any broad white area. Greater underwing-coverts uniformly grey with just a few very narrow pale spots near tips.

Tail 14 visible tail feathers, but with an obvious gap in the middle of the tail, implying that the two central tail feathers were missing and that the total must have been 16. Outer tail feathers barred black and white, without any other tinge.

Bare parts Bill looked shorter than in most Common Snipe.

The meeting could only conclude that the bird was indeed a Wilson's Snipe. The bird was definitely present at Ty Crenn, Ouessant, on 17th-19th October, but it was not seen subsequently.

Vincent Legrand, Belgium.

Wilson's Snipe is the North American form of Common Snipe and was resplit as a separate species by the AOU in July 2002. Following the acceptance of the first for the Western Palearctic, a juvenile shot near Coleraine, Co. Londonderry, Northern Ireland, on 28th October 1991, the first for Britain was found on St Mary's, Isles of Scilly, on 9th October 1998. This bird remained until 7th April 1999 (and was perhaps seen again on 3rd-8th September 1999) and its identification was extremely well documented in *Birding World* 11: 382-385 & 12: 56-61, such that these have become vital references on the identification of this subtle species. See also *Birding World* 8: 179-190 (Carey & Olsson 1995, Field identification of Common, Wilson's, Pintail & Swinhoe's Snipes). Subsequently, others have been identified in the Western Palearctic on the Canary Islands (Tenerife, December 1998 & September 2002) and, most recently, on the Azores (São Miguel, October 2005 & Flores, November 2005). Eds.

Legrand, V. 2005. Identification of a Wilson's Snipe on Ouessant, Finistère. *Birding World* 18 (11): 482-484.