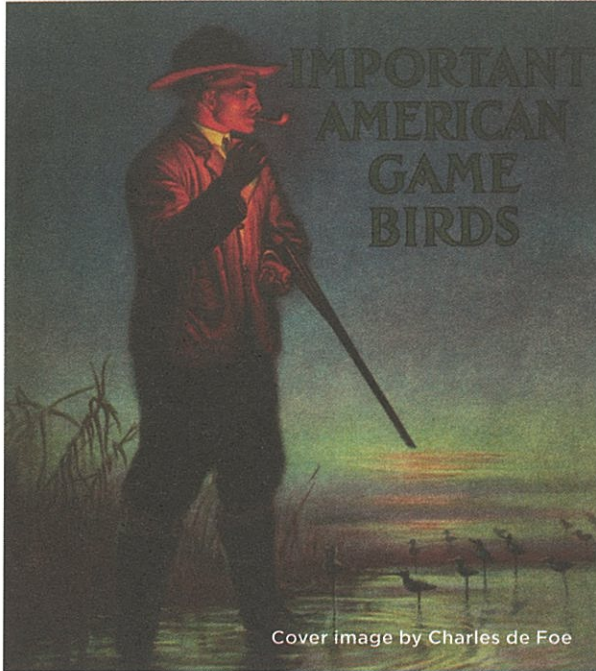




# Snipe, the Best-Kept Secret in the Uplands

BY CRAIG KOSHYK



**“Brother sportsman, are you a snipe-shooter? If not, perhaps before trying the sport it were well to know a little of the natural history of the bird.”**

*—Thomas C. Abbott, 1890*

**P**ersonally, I knew nothing of the natural history of what eventually became my favorite bird to hunt.

All I knew was that each and every time I walked across my uncle’s hayfield on my way to hunt ducks in the Libau marsh, I’d flush at least a half dozen snipe. And for the first 25 years of my hunting career, I never shot a single one of them. In fact, I’d never even heard of anyone hooting a snipe even though they are a perfectly legal game bird here in Manitoba. My dad, uncles, cousins all ignored them, so I did too.

Then a Frenchman opened my eyes.

I’d met him on one of my many trips to Europe when I was writing my first book. He was a keen upland hunter who bred Pont-Audemer Spaniels and English setters. And since I am Canadian, and we tend to invite just about anyone, anywhere to come hunt with us, I suggested he book a flight to Manitoba in the fall and join us for a duck hunt or chase some grouse with us.

Fast forward a few months, and there we were, on a ranch owned by a friend where free-range beef cattle roam and, in a good year, a fair number of sharptail grouse can be found. Since he was my guest, and I wanted to make sure he got into some birds, I suggested that he let me handle my dogs first so he could just focus on shooting. After all, my dogs knew the place well, and if we got a bird or two, we could then let his dogs sniff them so they knew what we were after when it was their turn to hunt.

He agreed, and we headed off into the wind. About a minute into the hunt, a snipe flushed. I ignored it, my dogs did too. We pressed on. Another snipe flushed and then another. I just kept walking and my dogs kept hunting for sharptails. Suddenly, I heard a shot off to my right. I turned and saw a snipe flying in the air and Yannick shaking his head because he’d missed it. I walked over to him and said, “Uh, hey buddy, that’s



his dogs on snipe in France, so they are about as good as you can get in terms of high-performance snipe dogs. Within half an hour, we had three birds down, each one shot over a spectacular point. And that was the second thing I learned about snipe hunting that day. With a good dog, a challenging hunt becomes an absolutely thrilling hunt.

The final lesson came that night at home after Yannick showed me how to clean and cook the birds. When we joined my wife and niece at the table, raised our glasses to a successful hunt, and wished each other “Bon appetit,” I finally took my first bite of snipe flambé (recipe to follow).

Cue the choir singing...

Oh my goodness! It was everything he said it would be. The flavor was similar to woodcock but milder, somehow lighter. Like woodcock, the breast meat is dark red, the leg meat is white. Snipe are smaller than woodcock, so there is not as much meat on them, but ounce for ounce, it is clearly the winner in terms of taste and aroma.

Even before I took my first bite of snipe, I was convinced that I needed to hunt them more often. But by the end of the meal, I no longer wanted to hunt them, I needed to hunt them. By season’s end, my dogs were pointing snipe for me and searching for them just as hard as they did for sharptails, and I had become a full-fledged snipe hunter. Since then, my love of snipe hunting has only grown, and I have managed to convert a few friends to the challenge and joy of hunting the best-kept secret in the uplands.



sharptail; that was a snipe you shot at. We don’t  
em.”

really? Why not? Is it against the law here?”

), not at all. The regulations say that we can  
p to 10 a day, but no one shoots them because  
and ducks and geese are way bigger—lots more  
em!”

’d had a camera with me at that moment and  
photo of the expression on his face, it would  
ly be in a dictionary today under the words *gob-  
d*, *flabbergasted*, and *dumbfounded*. He looked  
d been struck by lightning and stood their stut-  
. . . “Wha . . . whaa what did you say? *Ten* per  
nd you never shoot them? You must be joking;  
nsane!”

ang on there buddy, what are you getting your  
bloomers in a knot for? They’re just snipe.”

screamed, “*Just snipe!?*” and followed up with  
of French f-bombs. When he’d calmed down a  
explained that in much of Europe, snipe are the  
most coveted bird of all. They are adored for the  
ge they present to shooters and dogs and are rel-  
l for their delicious aroma and flavor on the plate.  
kay, buddy, if you insist, we’ll try to bag a couple.  
I gotta clean and cook ‘em.”

accord.” (Agreed.)

off we went in search of a snipe or two for supper.  
e first half of the hunt didn’t go well. My dogs  
ed to ignore snipe, so every bird we shot at was  
lush. After a half box of shells each, we had zero  
the bag, and I was starting to realize just how  
ging snipe shooting really is.

t when we switched out dogs, everything  
d. You see, Yannick trains, field trials, and hunts

But why did it take a Frenchman to teach me the ways of the snipe? Has snipe hunting always been more or less unknown by the majority of North American hunters?

The answer is no. In fact, back in 1855, Elisha J. Lewis wrote in his book *The American Sportsman*, "Snipes are equally esteemed in all parts of the world where they are known, and the richness and delicacy of their flesh may be considered as second alone to that of the Woodcock; we need not add, therefore, that hunting them is a favorite pastime with the American Sportsman."

So what happened? Why did interest wane so much in North America that the term "snipe hunt" became synonymous with "wild goose chase" and was used as the name of a practical joke?

A combination of factors eventually led to the decline. Among them is the fact that shooting a snipe on the wing is not easy. In fact, it was considered so difficult that anyone who could do it on a regular basis was called a *sniper*, a term we still use today to describe expert marksmen.

Adam H. Bogardus, known as the Champion Wing Shot of America wrote, "Seventeen years ago I moved to Illinois, and settled on the Sangamon River, near Petersburg. . . . It was, in 1850, and is to this day, one of the best places for snipe that I know of. It was a paradise for a sportsman; and as for the snipe and quail, there was hardly a man there who could kill them except myself" (*Field, Cover, and Trap Shooting*, 1874).

Today, with a modern shotgun and ammo, hitting a snipe is far less difficult than in Bogardus's day, but that doesn't mean it's easy. In fact, snipe are probably the best birds to keep a hunter humble, no matter what his score is at the trap and skeet range.

In addition to being a challenging target, in some regions, hunting snipe can be physically demanding. Lewis, again, wrote that:

*There is no game that requires more skill and judgment in shooting, or demands a greater share of labor and perseverance to follow. A sporting writer—no great admirer of this sport, however, we imagine—remarks that "Snipe-shooting is a sport the best calculated for arousing excepted) to try the keenness of the Sportsman, to ascertain his bottom, and if he can stand labor,*

*water, mire, swamps, and bogs. He should be possessed of a strong constitution, not liable to catch cold, and have all the fortitude, as well as exertion, of a water-spaniel; he should be habitually inured to wet, dirt, and difficulties, and not be deterred by cold or severe weather. (The American Sportsman)*

Lewis is correct. Snipe hunting can be a very tough slog. In some regions, the birds are found only in muddy swamps and bogs that can be incredibly hard to negotiate, and in places like Florida, some of the best snipe grounds may also be home to alligators. But in most places, you can find snipe in grounds that are much easier to cover. I do all of my snipe hunting in flat, open pastures that are a breeze to walk across and, best of all, offer my dogs excellent opportunities to point the birds. And I never hunt snipe in nearby marshes, even though they can hold a lot of birds. Not only does the heavy, sticky mud we call "Manitoba gumbo" or "loon shit" make it nearly impossible to get around, the birds don't really hold well enough for the dogs to point them.

But even when you find places that are easy to walk across, you still face another challenge. As Thomas Abbot explained it in *Shooting on Upland, Marsh and Stream* (1890), snipe are extremely unpredictable:

*In the hunting for and shooting of other winged game, if the sportsman is a good shot, and has dogs of fair average abilities, he can follow certain hard and fast rules and meet with success, supposing him to be in a country fairly well stocked with game; but in snipe shooting, beyond the old rule of always working downwind, this will not apply. And why? Simply because, of all our game birds, none are so erratic in their habits as the snipe. Every variation in temperature, every shift of the wind, is sure to be followed by a change in their feeding or lying grounds, and they will often shift their quarters even when these apparent causes are absent. One hour they may be very wild, the next, extremely tame; hence the novice, who, perhaps, may have been having good shooting, and is congratulating himself on the accommodating humor of the birds, may the same day, within a short time, be anathematizing them for their wildness or their seemingly causeless veering of quarters.*

Another reason snipe hunting faded away in North America was growing opposition to, and the eventual banning of, the practice of hunting them in the spring. Abbott gives credit for the ban to Nicholas Rowe:

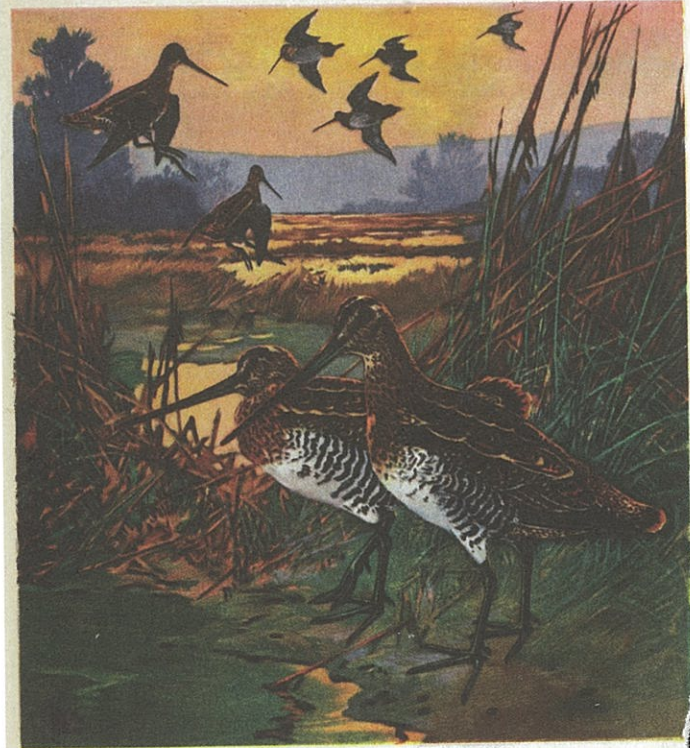
*Formerly it was the custom to shoot them during their spring migration, but I am glad to be able to say that this custom is now forbidden by law in most of the States. I can not refrain from saying here that the practice of spring shooting of any winged game was a most barbarous one, born of ignorance, and continued through thoughtlessness. That it is so fast being put down, is due to the fearless, persevering energy of one man, and that man is Dr. N. Rowe, editor of the American Field.*

When Rowe convinced the authorities to shut down the spring snipe season, he probably eliminated the chances of field trials on snipe ever becoming popular in America. A few trials on snipe were held in the late 1800s, but they were mainly one-off challenge matches between two individuals, not regular public events organized by sportsmen's clubs. In Europe, field trials on snipe became very popular and are held in various countries to this day. One of the most prestigious is the European Championships for Irish Red Setters on Snipe held in Ireland each year. You can find videos of the event on YouTube.

Today, snipe hunting is still very much a niche sport. Few North American hunters pursue snipe on a regular basis, and there is hardly any coverage of the sport in the outdoor press. That said, it is increasingly clear that the number of snipe hunters is on the rise in parts of the US and Canada. Online snipe hunting groups are popping up here and there, and a snipe hunting community is starting to form. You can even find great snipe recipes in some of the new cookbooks like Hank Shaw's excellent *Pheasant, Quail, Cottontail*. And the reasons snipe hunting is starting to become more popular are the same today as they were 150 years ago. Here is Lewis again:

*Notwithstanding the mud and mire, trouble and vexation, we consider Snipe-shooting a most pleasant diversion, more particularly on account of the great number of shots to be had in the course of a day, as well as their rapid succession, and we are acquainted with no kind of sport that so soon improves an indifferent shot as this does. So much quickness, and at the same time so much judgment, are so absolutely necessary to hit upon the exact moment for drawing upon the trigger, that the Tyro, with a little practice, will soon*

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WILSON'S SNIPE  
*See page 35*

*have complete control over all his movements; and it is also necessary for him to be ever on the "qui vive" (high alert), as nearly every bird that springs presents a different shot.*

What about dogs?

"The best dogs for snipe," Abbott quotes 19th-Century author Frank Forester, "are the bravest, fastest, and best trained that can be got for money."

You can hunt snipe with or without a dog. I've done both. But I must say that shooting snipe over the staunch point of a fast, big running dog is such an incredible thrill that doing it any other way seems like a bit of a letdown. But that's just me. You may prefer hunting them without a dog, and that's cool too. But you will need to find areas that hold enough snipe that by just walking across the field or through the rushes, you will flush a few. But make sure to mark them down, they are notoriously hard to find once they hit the ground. And if you have a dog of the nonpointing persuasion, say a retriever or spaniel, you can use them to flush and retrieve snipe for you. But you still need to keep an eye

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on exactly where the bird went down. I've seen dogs with outstanding noses run right past a freshly shot snipe laying in the grass and others that needed to pass the spot a couple of times before they located a downed bird. But if you have a pointing dog and access to good snipe grounds, you are in for a treat. I've hunted a wide variety of upland birds in Canada, the US, and parts of Europe, and for me, there is nothing more thrilling than watching a good snipe dog doing its thing.

And that is yet one more thing about snipe hunting that has probably hindered its development in North America: not all pointing dogs will point snipe, no matter how good they may be on other species. One of my dogs was an excellent woodcock and pheasant dog, yet she never pointed a single snipe in the 15 seasons we hunted her, despite having hundreds of opportunities to do so. But I also had a dog that was at the other end of the spectrum. He was a snipe master, among the best I've ever seen. He was an extremely fast and big running dog that would absolutely slam point on snipe from incredible distances.

For years I couldn't understand why there was such a difference between the two dogs, and others that I have hunted snipe with—some pointed snipe, some didn't. Then I was hired to translate a Cesare Bonasegale's *The Noble Bracco*, a 2018 book on the Bracco Italiano, an old breed that was first introduced into the United States just a couple of decades ago. Bonasegale was a breeder, field trialer, and hunter who grew up in northern Italy, one of the best regions of the world for snipe. As I worked on the book, I would pay extra attention to any passages that mentioned snipe. Eventually I learned that, according to Cesare, the ability to point snipe is actually a geneti-

cally controlled trait. Here's a longish excerpt from my translation:

*It is only natural to wonder if some dogs are genetically predisposed to point one type of bird more than others. The answer is no. Genetics have nothing to do with it. A dog excels on woodcock or becomes a specialist at hunting in the mountains by using its intelligence and amassing a treasure trove of experience in that sort of hunting.*

*The exception is snipe dogs. They are born specialists.*

*There are excellent partridge dogs out there that simply cannot point a snipe, even after dozens of exposures to the birds. It's not a question of scenting ability. There are dogs that point other game bird species from incredible distances but completely ignore snipe. Nor is it a matter of being cautious around snipe. Snipe dogs boldly hunt rice paddies and marshes with just as much audacity as any partridge specialist. There is no truth to the idea that hunting in wet terrain predisposes a dog to pointing snipe, since some dogs point ducks... but will totally ignore common snipe. By contrast, some lines of dogs regularly produce snipe specialists or at least dogs that will point snipe.*

*There is a reason that snipe hunting is only done in certain kinds of environments such as rice fields, marshes, flooded pastures, and in areas where that kind of terrain is common... It is because a tradition of snipe hunting, and selective breeding for snipe dogs developed there. It is not a matter of breeds, because there are lines of snipe dogs in English Pointers, Setters, Bracchi Italiani, Spinoni, GSPs and so on. Individuals selectively bred for snipe hunting systematically produce offspring that point snipe.*

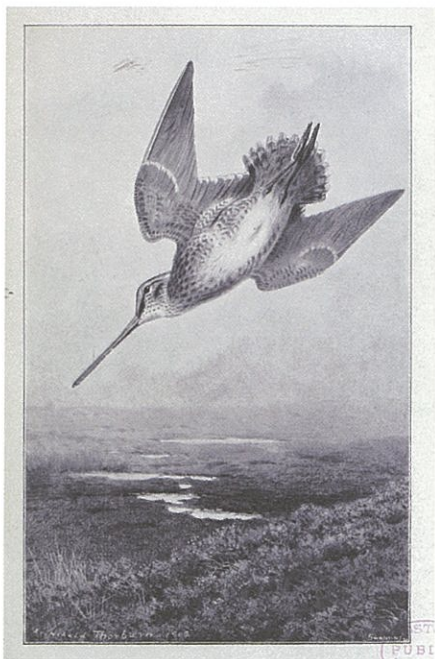


Image from *Snipe and Woodcock*  
by L. H. de Visme Shaw

*There is a long-held belief among snipe hunters that they should avoid exposing their young dogs to other species of game birds during their first, or even their second, hunting season, and just focus on running them on snipe in typical snipe cover. This can certainly help dogs learn to work in a very particular kind of terrain that takes a lot of getting used to. In fact, there are some natural snipe dogs that find flooded fields particularly daunting, especially rice paddies. For those dogs, overcoming the challenge means learning that—even though the terrain is difficult—it is where they will find the birds they were born to hunt. So, it is understandable that snipe hunters expose their dogs to that sort of ground right from the start. By doing so, they can achieve a sort of environmental imprinting in the dog that helps it overcome the unpleasantness of a wet environment and really learn to love it. Of course, this can sometimes go too far and result in a sort of single-minded obsession that can eliminate a dog's interest in hunting even the most welcoming uplands.*

*Since snipe hunting is such a specialized pursuit, a trainer has a difficult choice to make. On the one hand,*

*he needs a dog that doesn't just point snipe, but one that knows where to look for them. That can only come from experience and doesn't happen overnight. But on the other hand, the more time the dog spends hunting and imprinting in rice paddies, the more difficult it will be for him to adapt to different kinds of terrain.*

My love for hunting snipe is based on the challenge they bring in the field and the delicious meat they offer to the table. But I was lucky; I was introduced to the sport by a hunter from a land where snipe hunting and snipe cooking are considered fine art. Unfortunately, in North America, I've heard from more than one snipe hunter that they eat the birds they bag only reluctantly and out of a sense of obligation, and some never eat them but just give them away. So I'd like to do my part too and conclude this piece with a super easy, and super tasty way to cook snipe. If you follow the instructions, I'm pretty sure you will end up, like me, a snipe hunter and snipe eater for life. 🌞



# Snipe Flambé

Pan-seared snipe in butter and cognac, served on toast.

## Ingredients

Snipe, one or two per person makes a nice appetizer.

½ stick of butter (or more). And don't skimp here either. Use the best butter you can find. My go-to is Beurre D'Isigny, from Normandy, France. Kerrygold from Ireland is also very good and less expensive. Both are relatively easy to find in US and Canadian shops. And don't worry about using globs of butter. Snipe meat is super lean, so adding some fat to the dish is not only okay, it is necessary.

½-inch slices French bread or other bread that toasts well. Don't skimp here; use the best fresh-made bread you can find, preferably from a local baker.

½ cup brandy, cognac, Armagnac, or bourbon.

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

## Instructions

Note: Snipe (like woodcock, duck, grouse, etc.) should *never* be cooked beyond medium-rare. If the meat is cooked past that point, it can take on a strong liver-like flavor and lose all of the juicy, delicate taste it should have. In addition, the French say that snipe should be eaten *au bout du fusil*, literally "at the end of the barrel," i.e., right way, the same day they are shot. It's not that they go bad quickly or anything; it's just that they don't really benefit from aging for a few days as other game birds do. So we usually eat snipe right after we get back from a hunt or the next day. And yes, we have kept them for up to a week in the fridge like we do other birds, but we have found that the French are right—snipe really don't gain anything by aging.

Clean the birds as you would a woodcock. Remove breast meat and legs. We also take out the entrails (more about that later).

In a good skillet, over medium-high heat, melt a tablespoon or so of butter and brown both sides of several slices of bread in it. Remove and set aside.

Add more butter to the pan (don't be shy, use a good chunk), and add the snipe legs. They take a bit longer than the breast to cook, so put them in first. You want a fairly hot pan, not smoking, of course, but enough to give a good sizzle.

After about two minutes, turn the legs and add the breast meat. Let everything sizzle for a minute or two, then turn and cook for another minute or two.

Add a decent sized dash or three of cognac or brandy or bourbon. *Optional:* you can 'flambé' the dish by touching a match to the booze just as it heats up. *Be careful!* Stand back when you touch the match to the pan. The flames will extinguish once the alcohol has burned off.

As the butter-booze combo continues to bubble, scoop the breast meat out (you can leave the legs in for now) and turn off the heat.

On a cutting board, cut the breast meat into four to six slices. The meat should be quite rare inside, dark to light pink. If it still looks really raw, add a bit of time in the pan, but not too much. You absolutely must avoid overcooking the breast meat. The leg meat can cook till it looks white.

Put the sliced breast meat on the toast.