Wildlife Express!

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Sneaky Snipes

photo by Tom Ulrich

IDAHO FISH & GAME

Let's Look At....
The Snipe

Have you ever been camping and heard a ghostly sound? A sound similar to an owl, a low "whu-whu-whu-whu." The sound may have scared you a bit. If you were camping by a wet, grassy meadow, you may have heard a snipe.

Snipe are birds. Scientists call snipe *Gallinago gallinago* (gal-i-NAA-go gal-i-NAA-go). The name snipe means to shoot from a concealed place. When scared, snipe fly up quickly from their hiding places. Snipe like to be in wet, grassy habitats. Their feathers are the perfect combination of brown, white and black to blend in with tall grass. If danger is near, snipe freeze and stay put. You almost have to step on the snipe before it will fly off. When it does fly, it flies away quickly and is very noisy.

The ghostly sound made by snipe is made by the males. When it is breeding time, the males fly in circles over their breeding areas. While flying, they will suddenly dive down and then come back up like a roller coaster. When diving down, they spread apart their tail feathers. The wind hits their tail feathers and makes the loud ghostly sound. This is called "winnowing." Males also make this sound during migration and in the winter.

Females make the nest. They pick a spot on the ground that is near clumps of grass. The female will use her feet and scrape out a spot for her nest. She will line the nest with grass, leaves and moss. Sometimes snipe will pull grasses over the nest and made a sort of roof. Once her nest is complete, the female lays one to four brown speckled eggs. The eggs hatch in about 20 days.

As soon as the baby snipe are out of their eggs and are dry, they leave the nest. Both parents help to raise the young. They divide the young into two groups. The male takes one group, and the female takes the other group. The male and female raise them separately. By raising the babies in two groups, the parents help to make sure that at least some of the babies will survive until they can fly. If a fox finds the babies the mother has and kills them, at least the male still has his group. Snipe are able to fly when they are about 20 days old.

Snipe have long, slender bills. Their bills are perfect for grabbing insects, worms and snails. Snipe will stick their bills into water or wet, muddy ground to look for food. What makes their bills so special is that snipe can wiggle the tips of their bills up and down! They can even feel things with their bills. When they feel a big, juicy beetle larva, they grab it with their bill and swallow it down.

Snipe drink a lot of water. They need to drink water to help them make pellets. Snipe can't digest snail shells or insect exoskeletons, so they spit these things out in pellets.

Snipe are found all across Idaho, but many people never know they are around. Snipe are secretive and usually quiet. At least until you almost step on them!

IDAHO FISH & GAME

Sandpipers

Have you ever been to the ocean and watched birds chasing the waves? When the waves go back into the ocean, birds run out onto the wet sand and pull out sand crabs to eat. It's an amazing thing to watch. The birds are so quick and alert. If you have seen birds chasing waves, you may have been watching sandpipers.

These birds are sometimes called shorebirds. They are often found along the shores of oceans, lakes and rivers. Some sandpipers are also found in wet meadows and grasslands.

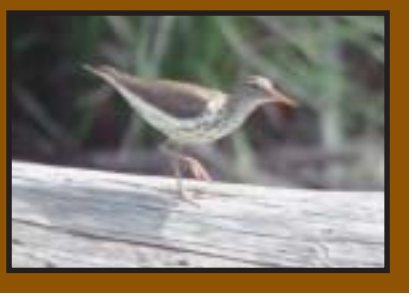
Worldwide there are 89 species of birds in the sandpiper family. Idaho has six species. Some members of the family, like the snipe, spend most of their time on the ground. While others spend most of their life out at sea. They only go to land to nest and raise their young.

All members of the sandpiper family have longer, thin bills. Sandpipers use their bills to reach through water or into soil to capture their food. Sandpipers may eat small fish, insects, worms, crabs or snails. It all depends upon where the bird lives.

Many members of the sandpiper family are known for their long migrations. Tattlers fly from their breeding grounds in northeast Asia to their wintering grounds in Australia. That's about 5,000 miles one-way!

It can be difficult to tell some sandpipers apart; many look similar. Even members of the same species can look different from each other. Some sandpipers have more colorful feathers when they are younger. These feathers fall out as the birds mature and are replaced with adult feathers. Many sandpipers also have special feathers that grow for the breeding season. Unlike some birds that grow colorful and showy feathers for the breeding season, sandpipers grow feathers that are dull. The different colors of brown, black and beige help the sandpipers blend in with the ground. Sandpipers build their nests on the ground, so being camouflaged from danger is important.

Look for spotted sandpipers along the shores of Idaho's lakes, ponds and streams. Watching sandpipers look food sure can be a great way to spend an afternoon!



Wonderful Wetlands

Do you know what a wetland is? Judging by the name, you might think a wetland is just that, wet dirt. But wetlands are more than just soggy soil.

In North America, you can find more plants and animals living in wetlands than any other place. Only about one percent of all of Idaho's land is considered wetlands. But 75 percent of Idaho's wildlife species depend upon wetlands during some part of their life cycle. Snipe are one of these animals. Wetlands give wildlife the food and shelter they need.

Wetlands also help to feed people. Have you ever eaten rice? Then you have eaten a wetland plant. Shrimp, fish and clams are other important foods that come from wetlands.

Wetlands also clean water. The slower water moves, the less dirt and pollution it can carry. Wetland plants slow down water, and dirt and pollution are filtered out.

Wetlands are not always wet. Areas need more than just water and land to be called wetlands. They need three things: water, soils that hold onto water and water loving plants. If one of these is missing, the area is not called a wetland.

There are many different kinds of wetlands. In Idaho, you may hear wetlands called **riparian** (ri-PAR-ee-en) areas. This is the green area along the water's edge. Wetlands around flowing water, like rivers and streams, are called marshes and swamps. Marshes have grass-like plants. Cattails are found in marshes. Swamps are wetlands with woody plants. Cottonwood trees and willows are found in Idaho's swamps.

Idaho also has wetlands called bogs and fens. In Idaho, they are from 4,000 to 60,000 years old! Many plants have a difficult time living in bogs, so they have other ways of getting the nutrients they need to survive. Two plants, sundews and bladderworts, eat meat. These plants capture insects in long, hairy, sticky leaves.

Playas (PLY-as) and potholes are also found in Idaho. Playas are often dry. They may hold water for just a few weeks. These small lakes are important to wildlife. Many toads lay their eggs in playas, and birds use them as places to rest during migrations.

Wetlands sure are more than just wet dirt. They are homes, nurseries, food factories and pollution eliminators.

Nifty Nests

Now is a great time to look for bird nests. Leaves have fallen from trees, and nests can be easier to spot.

Birds use many different materials to build their nests. They may use grass, twigs, moss, spider webs, plant seeds, animal hair, feathers or manmade materials. Nests may be different shapes and sizes and made from different materials, but every nest is made for the same reason. Nests are made to keep eggs and young birds safe and warm.

Nests are grouped according to how they are built and the shape that they take. The most common nests are cup shaped nests. Songbirds, like robins, usually build cup shaped nests.

Cavity nests are the safest nests. These nests are found in holes in trees or buildings. Many birds use the cavity made by woodpeckers. Bluebirds and wood ducks are just some of the birds that nest in cavities.

Scrapes are shallow spots scratched into the ground. Birds sitting on these nests are usually well camouflaged. Snipe nest on the ground and blend in well with the plants around them.

Hummingbird mother in her nest

Platform nests are usually built in trees. Some platform nests may be huge. Eagle nests can be nine feet across!

Adherent (ad-HIR-ent) nests are what barn swallows make. They are a cup nest that is plastered with mud to buildings and stone ledges.

Nests that look like a basket and hang from forks in trees are called pensile (PEN-siil) nests. Little birds called vireos make pensile shaped nests.

Another nest that hangs from a tree is called a pendulous (PEN-je-les) nest. They look like bags. Orioles are known for weaving beautiful pendulous nests.

When you see a nest, think about the bird that built it. Looking at a nest can tell you a lot about the bird.

Egg-cellent Eggs

When you think of eggs, you might think of the white or brown eggs in your refrigerator, but eggs come in an amazing variety of colors, shapes and sizes. There are about 9,000 different kinds of birds, and each kind lays it own special egg.

The colors and patterns on eggs help camouflage them from predators. Snipe eggs are speckled with brown to help them blend in with the ground. Saw-whet owls lay eggs that are bright white. These owls lay their eggs in dark cavities in trees. The bright white color helps the owls see the eggs.

The shape an egg takes is also unique to a bird's life. Birds that nest on cliffs, like shorebirds, have eggs that are smaller at one end than the other end. This is to make the eggs roll in a circle and not fall off the cliff. Birds that lay their eggs in deep nests, usually lay eggs that are round. They don't have to worry about their eggs falling out of the nest.

Although all eggs look different on the outside, the insides are similar. The shell of an egg is hard so that it protects the growing chick inside. The chick inside the egg is called an embryo (EM-bree-o). As the embryo is developing inside the egg, its food is the yellow yolk. The egg white is there to cushion the yolk and embryo.

When the chick is ready to break out of the shell, it has a tool to help it. Chicks have a special point on their beak called an egg tooth. This helps them crack the shell. As the bird grows older, the egg tooth disappears.

Hope you know more about eggs!

Killdeer eggs

Food to Fit the Bill

Think of a bird. You may have thought of a robin or eagle. Perhaps the snipe jumped into your mind. All of these birds look differently and have different shaped beaks. You can learn a lot about a bird just by looking at its beak.

Birds' beaks are their kitchen utensils. Beaks are the tools that birds use to capture, gather and eat their food. Many bird beaks work just like utensils you may have in your kitchen.

Can you guess whose beak works like tongs? Herons and shorebirds need to probe in the water and ground to find food. Long, thin bills are great for that. The long bill of a snipe is perfect for getting worms out of the ground. Snipe can feel the vibrations of worms with their bills. They flex the tips of their bills and scare worms right into their mouths!

Birds that eat seeds and nuts need a nutcracker, and that is just what finches have. Their short, stout beaks are strong. They even have ridges on the inside of their beaks like the ridges on a nutcracker. The ridges help hold and put pressure on the seeds. This makes it easier for the birds to open seeds and nuts.

Woodpeckers eat insects under tree bark. They need a beak that is sharp, pointed and chisel-like to pull tree bark apart and drill holes in trees. Their beaks are strong and work like ice picks.

Can you think of a bird that has a turkey baster beak? It's the hummingbird. Hummingbird beaks are long, thin and round. This shape helps them to probe in flowers and suck out nectar. Their tongues are also special. Their tongues roll in at the edges and have hairs on the tips. The hairy tips help hummingbirds lap up nectar, and the rolled edges give them a trough to carry the nectar to the back of their mouths.

These are just some examples. Can you think of others? Next time you see a bird, look closely at its beak. You might be able to figure out what it eats.

Wildlife on the Move

During the fall and spring, we often see animals on the move. They are migrating from one habitat to another. An animal may migrate thousands of miles or ten feet. The distance an animal moves is not important. What is important is that the animal moved between habitats during the year to survive.

Animals migrate for many reasons. During the fall, days become shorter; nights become longer. The amount of sunlight reaching us is less, and temperatures are cooler. With shorter days, animals have less time to look for food. Food that was easy to find in summer is now much harder to find, especially if it is buried under snow. Many animals migrate because they cannot find enough food to eat.

Snipe migrate from their breeding areas to wintering areas. Snipe that breed in Canada and the northern United States could not stay there during the winter. They would not be able to find food through thick snow. These snipe migrate to wintering grounds in the southern United States and South America. Snipe that live in milder climates, like along the Pacific coast, do not have to migrate at all.

Do frogs migrate? They sure do! Spotted frogs that live in southern Idaho migrate from hibernating sites to breeding and feeding sites. Some frogs migrate one-fourth to one-half of a mile between habitats. That's amazing for a frog!

Migration is a wonderful thing. It is one tool animals use to solve the problem of disappearing food. Mammals, birds, bats, frogs and fish migrate. Can you think of another animal that migrates?

Going on a Snipe Hunt

Has anyone ever teased you about going on a snipe hunt? Well, in Idaho, you actually can hunt snipe. But when some people talk about snipe hunting, they are not thinking about hunting real snipe. They are thinking about making someone look silly.

A snipe hunt is a practical joke. It involves giving a person an impossible task. Usually the person has no idea that she is being made fun of.

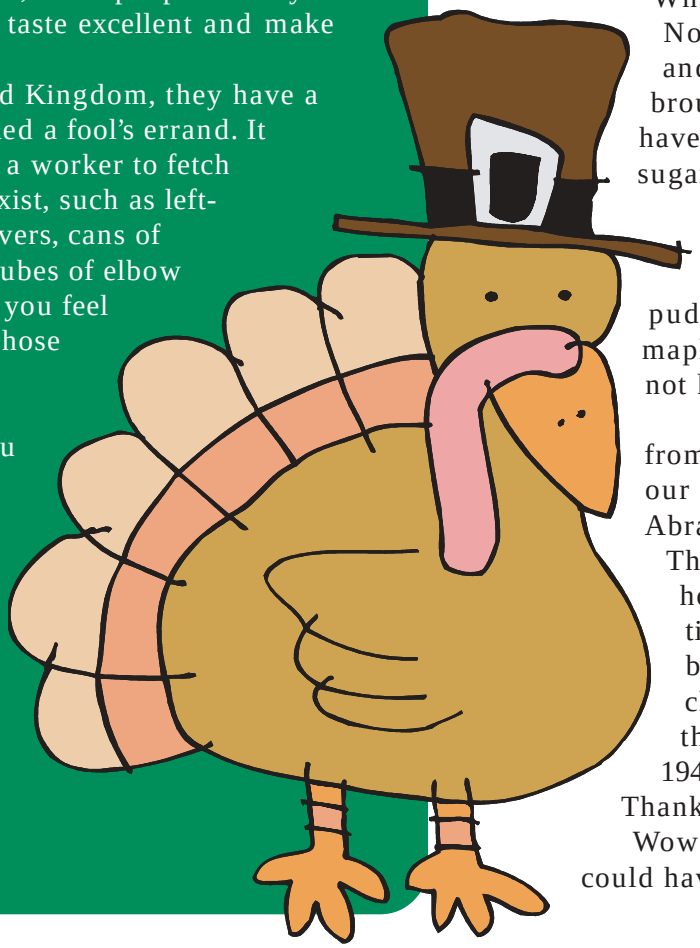
The person sent on the snipe hunt is told a story about a bird or animal and is given some strange way to catch it. One popular way to catch the "snipe" is to run around the forest carrying a bag and making funny noises. Since the animal doesn't exist, the person looks foolish. Some people who have been sent on a "snipe hunt" will even tell you there is no such thing, but we know better.

Perhaps the origin of this joke is that hunting real snipe is difficult.

They fly in a zigzag pattern and are very small. Yet in Idaho, some people still try to hunt them. They taste excellent and make a great meal.

In the United Kingdom, they have a practical joke called a fool's errand. It involves sending a worker to fetch tools that don't exist, such as left-handed screwdrivers, cans of striped paint or tubes of elbow grease. Wouldn't you feel silly looking for those things?

Next time someone asks you if you want to go on a snipe hunt, be careful! They might be trying to trick you into doing something funny.



It's Thanksgiving Time

Thanksgiving's here! Time to eat and stuff our stomachs with yummy food. Thanksgiving and Pilgrims seem to go together like bread and butter, but the Pilgrims never really held a Thanksgiving feast. Now before you cancel dinner, read on and learn how our Thanksgiving came to be.

The Pilgrims did have a feast in 1621 after their first harvest of crops. This is the feast people often refer to as "The First Thanksgiving." This feast never happened again, and the Pilgrims would not have called it a "Thanksgiving." To the Pilgrims, a day of thanksgiving was a day of prayer and fasting, not eating!

The first harvest feast was held around the first of October and lasted three days! The pilgrims didn't have a building large enough to hold 140 people, 50 pilgrims and 90 Native Americans, so the feast was held outside.

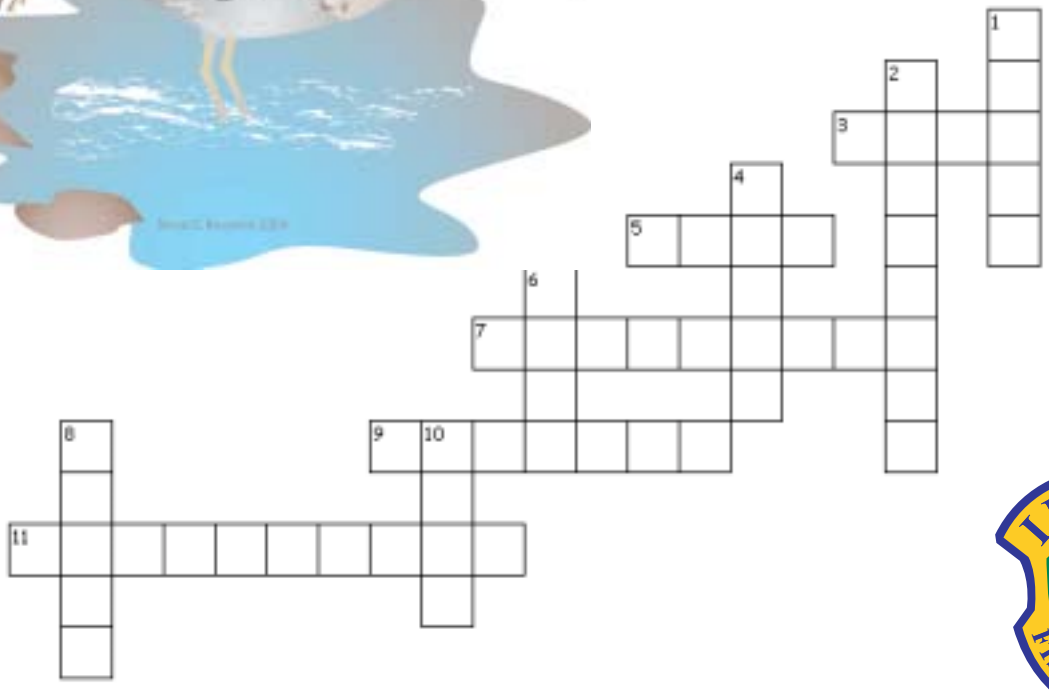
Do you think the pilgrims and Native Americans ate the same foods we eat today? Some were the same. They ate deer, fish, wild turkeys, ducks, geese and other birds. They also ate Indian corn, wheat and berries. Do you think they ate corn of the cob? No, corn on the cob was not eaten. Indian corn was only good for making cornmeal.

What about ham or sweet potatoes? Nope, the Pilgrims didn't have pigs, and sweet potatoes hadn't been brought to New England yet. They did have cranberries, but they did not have sugar to make cranberry sauce. Do you think they ate pumpkin pie? Pilgrims did have pumpkins. They most likely made a pumpkin pudding sweetened with honey or maple syrup, but their pudding would not have had a crust.

The Pilgrim's feast was different from ours, but it became the model for our Thanksgiving of today. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln made the last Thursday in November a national holiday of Thanksgiving. Up to that time, no permanent holiday had been set. President Roosevelt changed the day of Thanksgiving to the fourth Thursday in November in 1941, and this is when we celebrate Thanksgiving today.

Wow! Who would have thought all this could have evolved out of a harvest feast?

Snipe Crossword



Across

3. This is a bird's kitchen utensil.
5. Snipe can do this with the tips of their bills.
7. What we call an animal moving from one habitat to another.
9. These contain shells and exoskeletons snipe cannot eat.
11. This helps protect snipe from predators.

Down

1. What many "snipe hunts" are.
2. Seventy-five percent of Idaho's wildlife use these.
4. Birds build these to keep eggs safe.
6. Snipe can feel vibrations of their food with this.
8. A snipe might use this to make a roof over her nest.
10. Birds develop inside these.

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If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to the address printed above!