

Common snipe

Gallinago gallinago



BASC's evidence review and recommendations for sustainable shooting

2023–2028 Recommendation

Delay shooting until September where resident breeding common snipe are present.

Common snipe – BASC recommendation

Delay shooting until September where resident breeding common snipe are present.

Research required

- Focused studies on snipe as opposed to lowland waders, as snipe are often missed in traditional survey techniques.
- Submission of bag data is required to better inform harvest estimates (data can be submitted to GWCT National Gamebag Census or BASC Green Shoots Bagged It).
- Shooters should support the BASC wing survey to enable better understanding of adult:juvenile ratios.
- Increased ringing, ring resighting, and ring recovery reporting required.
- Research into habitat factors that may be influencing snipe declines, such as food abundance.
- Greater understanding of recruitment is required to help disentangle habitat-mediated pressures from productivity issues.

Shooting restrictions

- Should avoid shooting common snipe in areas where resident breeding snipe are present until 1 September
- Show restraint, even when resident birds are absent. Shoot what you need, not what you can
- Curb shooting in severe weather.

Habitat management

- Habitat management for both breeding and wintering populations is required:
 - Raise water levels to create wetter habitats.
 - Reduce grazing pressure around breeding sites.
 - Scrape creation and rush management.
- Pest and predator control.
- Refuge provision; minimise disturbance either for set periods of time (temporal), or over dedicated areas of land (spatial) dependent on site requirements.

Stage 2 assessment

Gallinago gallinago – Common snipe

Species summary

Changes in snipe populations in the UK and Europe are primarily attributed to agricultural changes, however conservation efforts that have enabled recovery by other wading species have not been effective for snipe⁶⁻⁸. There is no evidence that shooting is driving this decline, and management for other game birds, such as predator control, has been beneficial for snipe⁹. The shooting community should continue to play a role in this species management as well as sharing bag returns and ring recoveries.

Species conservation status (see Table 1)

The common snipe (hereafter snipe) population shows a 10-year wintering population decline in the UK >25% between 2008–2018¹. Within the UK countries this trend is mixed, with Scotland, England and Northern Ireland experiencing significant wintering population declines (-43%, -28% and -41% respectively) compared to a slight increase in numbers in Wales (+3%)¹. Breeding populations show a different pattern however, displaying only a marginal decline in the overall UK population (-2.39%), with large breeding population increases in England (+43%)². Only 35% of the species global range is within Europe³, however this decline is reflected on the European continent within breeding populations and is anticipated to continue⁴. At a global scale, due to its large range and relatively high abundance, snipe are not yet considered 'Vulnerable' to extinction⁵.

	BoCC ¹⁰ (2020)	IUCN UK ¹⁰ (2020)	Europe ⁴ (2021)	EU28 ⁴ (2021)	AEWA ¹¹ (2018)	IUCN Global (Last updated in 2017)
Category	A	VU	VU (B)	LC (B)	B2c	LC
Trend (time period in brackets)	Decreasing (2008/09–2018/19)		Decreasing (over 3 generations)	Decreasing (over 3 generations)	European: Decreasing/Stable Icelandic: Decreasing(?) (2009–2018)	Decreasing
Population size estimate Mature individuals	Breeding: 66,500 pairs Wintering: 1,100,000 Individuals ¹²		5,270,000–7,260,000 (min-max)	844,000–1,520,000 (min-max)	European: 7,000,000–10,000,000 Icelandic: 1,100,000–1,100,000 (min-max)	15,000,000–29,000,000
Reason for category	Threatened in Europe Moderate non-breeding pop decline over 25yrs Moderate breeding range decline over longer term	Reduction in size of non-breeding pop. (either abundance or range) over 3 generations. Declines of 20–30% over 3 generations.	Population reduction observed & projected. Causes of reduction may not have ceased OR may not be understood OR may not be reversible.	n/a	Population >100,000 individuals but considered in need of special attention due to long-term decline.	Due to a large range and large population size, combined with a <30% decline over 3 generations, the population does not approach thresholds for 'Vulnerable'
WeBS UK 10-year trend (2008/09–2018/19): -27%¹ • BBS UK 10-year trend (2010–2020): -2.39%²						

Table 1. Species conservation status across different scales. *It has been highlighted by BASC that such automatic linkage between IUCN status and levels of protection by AEWA is directly contrary to the IUCN's advice on the use of its list.

Population dynamics

The snipe population continues to slowly decline across its range and lacks recent, focussed research on non-agricultural factors that may be impacting its population trend. Further research is required into predation, nesting success and chick survival. This research needs to be undertaken independently of, and alongside, habitat management that is currently implemented.

Hunting and harvest (see Table 2)

The snipe shooting seasons in the UK are not compliant with the Key Concepts of Article 7(4)13. The start date of the open season in Scotland (12th August) overlaps with the estimated end of the reproduction period for snipe in the north of the UK by two 'decades' (approx. 20 days). This is therefore in breach of the agreement. Snipe has a moderately large game bag in the UK, with high but declining bag numbers in recent years (2004: 64,000, 2012: 100,000, 2016: 85,000) that is reflective of the population decline^{14,15}. However, given its high population size in the UK, it is unlikely that this harvest level is unsustainable¹⁶. France, Ireland and the UK appear to have the largest reported bag numbers within Europe¹⁷.

Species	Species estimated λ_{max} (95% CI)	Potential excess growth (95% CI)	Mean Sustainable Hunt Index (95% CI)	Probability of unsustainable harvest
Common snipe	1.467 (1.336 - 1.732)	210,000 (140,000 - 320,000)	0.392 (0.133 - 0.763)	0.000

Table 2. Estimated sustainability of species harvest in the UK. Table from Ellis & Cameron 2022.

Limited studies suggest snipe may be sensitive to disturbance caused by shore-side and marshland hunting, therefore spatial restrictions on shooting and provision of refuges, as opposed to temporal restrictions, are likely to be beneficial to wintering snipe in the UK¹⁸. Recovery of ringed birds by hunters has contributed to knowledge surrounding migration and movement of snipe, therefore continued bag reporting and participation in ringing studies are important roles for the shooting community^{19–21}.

Pressures, action and research

Pressures

The drivers of snipe declines are unclear. Overall declines in wading birds are predominantly attributed to changes in agricultural practices and land use²². These changes include increased drainage^{3,23,24}, improvement of marginal grassland^{23,25}, intensification of grazing^{23,24} and increased use of fertilisers²². However, given the conservation measures employed since the 1990's and continued decline of snipe, it is possible that these factors are not the main drivers of snipe declines. Predation, particularly of nesting birds, is suggested to be a major contributor to lack of snipe recovery^{26–30}.

Practical action

A number of changes to agricultural management have already been undertaken through agri-environment schemes, such as raising water levels and creating wetter fields³¹, reducing grazing pressure around wader breeding sites, scrape creation and rush management^{23,32}. In upland areas, re-wetting programmes are also likely to be beneficial to snipe, although this species is understudied in moorland habitats²⁴. As for many ground-nesting waders, predator control is likely to improve breeding success of snipe, however trials so far have had mixed effects ^{8,9,23,30}. Reduced disturbance of snipe, through provision of refuges during shooting seasons is also recommended^{18,22} alongside overall wetland restoration.

Research action

Studies on migratory populations may reveal changes to migratory routes related to climate change which is in turn impacting wintering populations in the UK. Research into habitat factors that may be influencing snipe declines such as prey abundance are required to help understand why current conservation action is not benefiting snipe populations. Increased, focussed studies on snipe as opposed to 'lowland waders' as a collective will allow for snipe-specific surveying and monitoring as they are often missed in traditional bird surveys³³. This work should focus on chick survival and nesting predation during the breeding season⁶. Predator control, alongside intensive nest monitoring would provide good evidence as to the efficacy of this management on snipe populations. Greater understanding of recruitment is required to help disentangle habitat-mediated pressures from productivity issues.

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