

Going on a Snipe Hunt

By David Olski

Stop me if you've heard this one before: You're going out hunting with some friends or family, and you've never been much of a hunter. It might even be your first time! But you're excited because you're being taken on a Snipe Hunt. Sure, you've never heard of a Snipe before but everyone has been talking up the experience, and you get to do the easiest part. Once the sun is starting to set you all drive out into the backwoods, and you get handed a sack. You're told all you have to do is hold it open and whistle while everyone else herds the snipes right into the sack.

Unbeknownst to you, you've just fallen for a centuries old prank! After you were left alone in the wilderness waiting for the snipes to come running towards you, everyone else ran back home to laugh and celebrate pulling off the trick. Depending on how trusting you are, you might be out there for a very long while, waiting in silence for the Snipes.

The Snipe Hunt is an age-old American tradition, and it's not exclusive to just hunters. Many children are taken Snipe hunting at Summer Camp or as a part of a Scouts program. It could even just be something you do with friends or family.

Descriptions of what a Snipe actually *is* will vary wildly from region to region, depending on who is conducting the Snipe Hunt. Some claim it to be a type of squirrel, a bizarre hybrid of rodent and rabbit with multicolor eyes. It may be a rare ground dwelling bird, or even a type of snake. Nobody being taken on a Snipe Hunt is actually going to catch a snipe, so the description can be as fantastical as you like. After all, it's not like they're real, right?

Well this may come as a shock, but the snipe is a very real animal indeed! In fact, there are 26 different species of snipes worldwide, all of which are wading birds. North America is home to the Wilson's Snipe. It's a small brown bird with a long beak and eyes placed oddly far back on its head. Here on the Upper Texas Coast, the Wilson's Snipe is a common sight at Brazoria Wildlife Refuge and other wetlands. They are incredibly widespread, with breeding grounds across Canada and the Northern United States, and spend the rest of the year spread across the rest of the continent, all the way down to the northern tip of South America.

People do hunt snipes, and not just as a prank! Snipes are particularly tricky birds to shoot, and British soldiers in 1770's India coined the term "sniper" for anyone who was reliably able to bag them. The term has persisted and now denotes a sharp shooter, though not necessarily one that is shooting a snipe.

The next time you're out in the wetlands, try to keep an eye (or ear!) out for these birds. They can be quite tricky to spot on the ground as they blend in well with their environment, but if you see a bird flushing from nearby watch how it flies. The Wilson's snipe will fly away in a characteristic zig-zag pattern, which is part of how they got their reputation as tricky shots. And if you happen to be out at

night during the right season, try listening for their mating displays. Males and Females will fly high up in the air and repeatedly dive to create a sound known as “winnowing” with their wings that sounds similar to the call of a Boreal Owl.

Photo credit: Celeste Silling

Photo Caption: The non-mythical Wilson’s Snipe