

## **The First Record of Jack Snipe (*Lymnocyptes minimus*) in British Columbia.**

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### **Introduction and Distribution**

The Jack Snipe (*Lymnocyptes minimus*) is a small shy shorebird that is found in the Old World breeding in marshes and water-logged bogs in sparse taiga and tundra from Scandinavia, across Russia, central Siberia, and as far east as the Chukotka Gulf in northeastern Siberia (Brazil 2009). This species is highly migratory, but due to its skulky and highly secretive habits is hard to locate on migration (Brazil 2009). The Jack Snipe winters from Great Britain, coastal areas of northwestern Europe, across areas of the southern Europe, north Africa, south to tropical Africa, areas of Turkey, areas of the Middle East, India east into Burma, parts of Vietnam, southeastern China, and Taiwan (Hayman *et al.* 1986, Message and Taylor 2005, Brazil 2009). This species has turned up as a vagrant on the Faeroe Islands (Hamilton *et al.* 2007), Azores, Madeira, in Africa south to Ghana, Nigeria, Zambia and Tanzania (Hayman *et al.* 1986) and is a rare to accidental vagrant in Japan and Korea (Brazil 2009).

The Jack Snipe is an accidental species anywhere in North America with a handful of records (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The first North American record is a specimen record from St. Paul Island, taken sometime in the spring of 1919 (Hanna 1920). There is a specimen record from Labrador at Makkovik Bay, December 24, 1927 (Austin 1929). There is also a record from Barbados on November 12, 1960 (Bond 1960).

South of Alaska, the Jack Snipe is an accidental late fall to early winter vagrant with most records shot by hunters (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). There are 2 accepted records for California by the California Bird Records Committee with the first, a bird shot by a hunter, at the Gray Lodge Wildlife Area, in Butte County, on November 2, 1938 (McLean 1939), and the second record from the Colusa National Wildlife Refuge, in Colusa County, on December 2, 1990 (Patten *et al.* 1995). There are 3 accepted records for Oregon by the Oregon Bird Records Committee with all records coming from the same general area of the state; the first record was from Sand Dunes, Lane County, on October 20, 2004, the second was shot by a hunter also at Sand Dunes, Lane County, on November 16, 2007, and the most recent record was found at Fern Ridge Reservoir, Lane County, on January 4, 2009 (OFO 2016). There is a single well documented accepted sight record from Washington State by the Washington Bird Records Committee from the Skagit Wildlife Area, in Skagit County, September 9, 1993 (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2016). In British Columbia, there is a recent well documented sight record from the late fall and early winter from the Delkatla Wildlife Sanctuary in Masset, Haida Gwaii (Toochin *et al.* 2014).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification is covered in most North American Field Guides. The Jack Snipe is a small species measuring 17-19 cm, wingspan of 38-42 cm, and weighing 28-106 grams which helps eliminate all other snipe species (Message and Taylor 2005, Brazil 2009). The Jack Snipe is very hard to see, but when flushed, usually by almost stepping on it, this species flies low, a short distance, fluttery flight style, on rounded wings and gives a short low “*gech*” call (Message and Taylor 2005, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). When alarmed the Jack Snipe will run through dense vegetation in a rail-like fashion, or even freeze in place, using vegetation as camouflage to hide its presence (O’Brien *et al.* 2006). The Wilson’s Snipe (*Gallinago delicata*) that is the common species found throughout British Columbia is larger bodied, measuring 26 cm, with a wingspan of 20 cm, and weighs 105 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Wilson Snipe can be an elusive species; the usual view of this species and the best way to view it is to flush it from grasses or sedges, as the bird escapes, it normally takes a rapid, zigzag flight with pointed wings, while uttering a rasping “*scaipe*” call (Mueller 1999, Message and Taylor 2005).

Jack Snipe is very distinctive looking and with clear views should be easily identifiable. It has an interesting feeding behaviour rocking its body rhythmically up and down while feeding (O’Brien *et al.* 2006, Brazil 2009).

Adult birds have a partial molt into breeding plumage that begins in February on the wintering grounds and is completed by May (O’Brien *et al.* 2006). Complete molt from breeding plumage into basic plumage is not well known, but takes place between July and November (O’Brien *et al.* 2006). Adults have a broad buffy-yellow split supercilium, enclosing a dark line above the dark eye (Message and Taylor 2005). The face is white with a distinct dark line from the side of the neck towards the bill that is below the eye (Hayman *et al.* 1986). There is also a dark line from the bill that goes through the eye to the side of the neck (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The bill is short, straight with thick pale base and a dark narrowing tip (Jonsson 1992, Message and Taylor 2005). The mantle has a blackish-brown and green-gloss with pronounced upper scapulars the have golden-buff fringes that give conspicuous parallel lines and these are also found on the lower tips of the upper scapulars (Jonsson 1992, Message and Taylor 2005, Paulson 2005). The underparts are white, with a brown-streaked breast and fine brown streaking on the undertail-coverts (Message and Taylor 2005, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The tail is short and wedge-shaped (Message and Taylor 2005, Paulson 2005). The legs are yellow (Message and Taylor 2005).

Juvenile birds are virtually identical to adults, but have less streaking on the undertail-coverts (Message and Taylor 2005).

### Occurrence and Documentation

The Jack Snipe is an accidental vagrant migrant species in British Columbia with a recent well described sight record found at Delkatla, Masset, on Haida Gwaii (Toochin *et al.* 2014). On November 7, 2009, Margo Hearne, Martin Williams and Peter Hamel were conducting a bird survey in the Delkatla Wildlife Sanctuary (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). The following is taken directly from correspondence with Peter Hamel and Margo Hearne.

“It had been stormy and wet for a few days. Margo crossed a narrow, muddy channel known as Delkatla Creek and entered the marsh grass adjacent to it. She flushed a Wilson’s Snipe about 2-3 feet from her which took off with its raspy, sharp call. It flew erratically, landing some distance away in the long grass. Further ahead in this long marsh grass, now dead and lying over, a tiny bird flushed silently within an inch of her toe. It startled her as it rose in an arc and landed within about 5 feet”.

“Margo called Peter, who had moved on down the flats, on her FRS radio full of excitement “It’s a tiny snipe! I’ve got a tiny snipe here!” About 15 minutes later Peter and Martin arrived and we all searched the area intently, but there was no sign of the bird. Back at the car Margo checked the National Geographic Field Guide and declared: “It’s a Jack Snipe, it’s the only thing it could be.” Margo did not get any colouration on the bird on this grey day, but she did see a clear silhouette of a small, stocky bird, its straight bill seemed only slightly shorter than its body. It was a “miniature snipe.”

The bird was not re-found despite several subsequent searches until on December 27, 2009 Margo Hearne, Martin Williams and Peter Hamel were participating in the Greater Massett CBC (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). The following is taken directly from correspondence with Peter Hamel and Margo Hearne.

“Once again we were covering the Delkatla Wildlife Sanctuary, a unique salt marsh on the outer north coast of Haida Gwaii. Peter was walking through a waterlogged section of dense low grasses and sedges. The habitat was dotted with tufts of grass about 2 ½ feet tall. The rest of the vegetation is matted down at this time of year. Peter was only a matter of a few yards from where Margo had seen the bird in November. As Peter put his foot forward a miniature snipe, no more than 1 or 2 feet in front of him, moved ahead, crouching, like a rail, on the silty mud of a narrow side channel that feeds into Delkatla Creek, before vanishing in the tall grasses. Peter had an unobstructed view of the bird. This particular section of the marsh is drained by a network of channels 2 ½ feet to 5 feet wide that feed into the creek. The tide was out so the silt in the bottom of the channel was visible. The water in this section is somewhat brackish when the smaller tides mix with two freshwater creeks that feed the marsh. During the big tides

(up to 24 feet) the saltwater covers the flats. On December 27<sup>th</sup> it was a small 19 foot tide. When Margo Hearne saw the snipe on November 8<sup>th</sup> it was also a 19 foot tide and the tide was out. Tuck (1972) says that the Jack Snipe in winter in its European range prefers “waterlogged expanses of sedges and cotton grasses.” In India it prefers “thick patches of cover in paddy fields to the more open swamp”. Peter was too close to use his binoculars. Besides he was mesmerized by the bright, broad creamy gold stripes on its back, much bolder than those on the Wilson’s back. It had a thick, straight bill somewhat larger at the base, not much longer than its head. The basal two thirds were pale in colour with the outer third grayish black. From the side, the dark tail appeared short and pointed. The small, plump body merged into the head, some streaking on its breast and flanks. The belly was white. This bird was distinctly smaller than the 3 Wilson’s Snipes seen earlier in a drier section of the flats”.

“Peter moved cautiously forward, but this time the bird fluttered weakly up briefly from the grasses to a height lower than his head before fluttering quickly back into the dense vegetation, some 10-15 feet in front of him, never to be seen again. It appeared to keep its wings above its head. Again the four broad creamy-coloured stripes on its back and head stood out. Its wings were small and distinctly rounded unlike the pointed wings of the Wilson’s Snipe. This bird reminded Peter of the day in early September, 1960, when he nearly stepped on and flushed an adult Black Rail from the grassy verge of a creek near Hamilton, Ontario. It barely cleared the vegetation and soon fluttered back into the dense cover not to be seen again. Margo and Martin responded immediately to Peter’s call and we searched diligently then and over the next few days but we never saw it again. The only traces were its tracks in the mud which Margo photographed. When compared with the Wilson’s tracks in Elbroch *et al.* (2001) they were distinctly smaller. After these encounters we felt very fortunate and privileged to have seen this bird. If we had walked a foot or two either side of this bird it probably would not have moved”.

To date, North American records of Jack Snipe have turned up from late October to early January and the Haida Gwaii records fits into the timing of this pattern perfectly. This species migrates later than other snipes, doesn’t arrive on the wintering grounds until November (Hayman *et al.* 1986). Adults and young birds remain in or near breeding grounds during molt in August and September, and rarely appearing south until mid-September (Hayman *et al.* 1986). Brazil (2009) lists the Jack Snipe as a rare to accidental vagrant in Japan occurring between September and January. The later migration likely explains why this species has been found in the late fall and in the winter in North America. In the winter, the Jack Snipe is generally a solitary species that favours dense wet vegetation which includes marshes and fields (Brazil 2009). This is the exact habitat the bird was found in at Delkatla Wildlife Sanctuary in Masset on

Haida Gwaii (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). There is every likelihood that the Jack Snipe will occur again somewhere in British Columbia, but given its shy nature it will probably take many years before another bird is found.

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