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Some Results from Banding Japanese Snipe near Sydney, New South Wales

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From November 1971 to 4 March 1978, 114 Japanese Snipe *Gallinago hardwickii* were banded* in eight locations in the Sydney district during 27 banding outings. Eight banders and numerous assistants participated. Netting problems are outlined; measurements, weights and details of recoveries are given.

The banding commenced as a deliberate though limited project in collaboration with the research being undertaken on this species by the CSIRO Division of Wildlife Research and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSW) (see Frith 1970). Subsequently a comprehensive account of the results of the research was published (Frith *et al.* 1977). However, as expected, the catching problems were considerable. Snipe are difficult to catch! Concerted efforts involving many hours of work, frequently in unpleasant conditions, often result in only a few snipe being caught. But the banding experience has provided some additional information on the habits of these birds, and this is documented here.

Although Japanese Snipe are not uncommon in suitable habitat from August to March, it is rare to find enough of them in situations suitable for netting. With Alan Morris in October 1971 near Seaham, N.S.W., eleven snipe were caught and banded. This was the greatest number caught in

any of our deliberate snipe-banding operations. In the Sydney district the best catches during similar deliberate activities have been six birds. On one of these occasions near Richmond, about 50 km west of Sydney, some 20 Japanese Snipe were seen in a swamp surrounded on three sides by trees and with a large clump of trees in the centre. The estimated number present was thought to be probably twice the number seen. Just prior to dusk, nets were erected in suitable places among the timber edge on one side of the swamp. During this process a few snipe were flushed; some flew off and disappeared but others circled around and landed in undisturbed areas including the centre location containing the main concentration near the clump of trees in the centre of the swamp. Slowly additional nets were set with similar effect until 14 had been erected. By that time at least 70 snipe were counted in the centre area. This group was then disturbed; by then the light was fading fast, providing good netting conditions. Immediately the birds flew from the centre site, two (low) single-shelf nets were erected in the area where they had been concentrated. In the meantime, as a result of the first "flushing" three snipe were caught. After these had been banded,

* Bands used were provided by the Australian Bird-banding Scheme, Division of Wildlife Research, CSIRO.

the remaining birds were flushed again. A further three resulted and although some had left the swamp, a number remained. By the time the second three had been banded, darkness had set in completely. About ten minutes after releasing the last of the birds banded, the five persons present completely circled the swamp in an extended line about five metres apart. Not a single snipe was flushed. Apparently they had left the swamp as darkness set in, although their departure was not observed and no calls were heard.

Conversely, at another swamp in the Richmond area, when carrying out night netting of waders, mainly Sharp-tailed Sandpipers *Erolia acuminata*, 13 Japanese Snipe were caught during one night. The particular swamp is very open with only one or two trees in the vicinity. Snipe are not usually found in the location during daylight except perhaps a solitary bird feeding or hiding in one of the drains leading into the swamp. However, they were numerous during the night and their calls were heard frequently throughout the night as they were flushed by banders moving about to check the nets.

At the same swamp a week earlier, snipe were flushed in considerable numbers judging from the number of calls as banders attempted to move the other waders from their undisturbed rest area into the area of the nets. But a severe, unpredicted southerly wind which struck with disturbing force, blew the 25 nets almost to the ground. Three birds and a vast amount of debris were caught in the nets—but no snipe.

Likewise, on 4 March 1978, a visit was made to Pitt Town lagoon near Windsor, N.S.W. to endeavour to catch waders. Wader banding has been carried out at this site on a number of times with variable, though limited success. On this occasion it was hoped that Sharp-tailed Sandpipers and possibly snipe might be caught. Twelve nets were erected in two places, suitably grouped, in the late afternoon as the daylight faded. Some 20 Sharp-tailed Sandpipers were flushed during the process. About the same number of Pied Stilts *Himantopus himantopus* were feeding in the shallow water nearby, and, with five or six Black-fronted Dotterels *Charadrius melanops*, were the only waders seen prior to darkness. The small numbers present were a disappointment as the chances of catching them in such circumstances was very unlikely.

As the darkness increased, five more nets were erected in a third location, and again some Sharp-tailed Sandpipers were disturbed in the process. Then while returning to the banding station, some Japanese Snipe were flushed from one of the areas where nets had been erected earlier during daylight. By midnight, 17 had been caught and banded. The only other waders captured during the operation were four Masked Plovers *Vanellus miles* and one Black-fronted Dotterel. The 17 snipe represent the most captured during a single outing in the Sydney or Newcastle districts.

These and similar experiences have indicated that most snipe prefer well-vegetated, timbered swamps during daytime but at night apparently move into open swamps to feed if conditions are suitable. Accordingly, an early morning visit was made to the timbered site, and nets were erected during darkness in the hope of catching incoming birds. The effort was thwarted by the approach of a large herd of cattle just at dawn. Protection of the nets became the immediate priority and all efforts were concentrated on keeping the cattle away from the nets. No doubt the disturbance caused any approaching snipe to seek quieter places. None was seen.

In some contrast to these experiences, Milledge (1975) in Tasmania in 1972 banded 171 Japanese Snipe during a three-day period using six 18 m nets. He estimated the number present to be 300-400 by initially flushing the birds, and indicated that they "did not appear to be alarmed by this initial disturbance."

Like Milledge, I also found that some snipe will squat and will only flush when closely approached. However, snipe are very individualistic in their habits. Many will flush easily and rarely are more than a few birds seen flying together in the fashion of other migratory waders; they frequently fly alone. If a number is flushed simultaneously some will circle the swamp then pitch down in another spot; others will fly through adjoining timber to disappear while a few make a rapid ascent often to 200 m or more before flying off. I have watched individuals with binoculars almost disappear from sight, then circle and return to the swamp or pitch down onto an open forest hillside nearby. Some of these have been flushed again by walking up through these areas. In one instance, one of these birds was perching on the branch of a large eucalypt some 3 m from the ground.

TABLE 1

Band Number	Banding Place	Date of Banding	Date of Recovery	Recovery Place	Distance	Direction
060-29228	McGraths Hill, Windsor	3.3.73	26.1.75	Barham, NSW	644 km	WSW
36732	Richmond	13.11.71	21.1.73	Windsor, NSW	6.6 km	NE
77050	Warriewood	6.2.72	20.2.72	Banding place	—	—
77076	Windsor	6.1.73	14.12.74	Geelong, Vic.	800 km	SW

In many cases the condition of the swamps varies greatly both during a season and from season to season. For instance, one swamp was excellent for wader banding during one out of seven seasons; it was fair during two other seasons, and quite unsatisfactory for the remainder. The extent and time of rain in relation to the wader season is the determining factor.

Measurements and Weights

The following measurements and weights are taken from my records of 80 Japanese Snipe banded in the Sydney district and a further 14 banded near Newcastle, N.S.W. Sex determination was not attempted. These data, although from considerably fewer samples, are similar respectively to those shown by Frith (loc. cit.) for birds measured in the field.

Measurements (in millimetres)

Feature	Range	Mean	Number of Birds
Wing span	504—540	525	82
Wing	150—168	161	58
Exposed culmen	57.6—81.0	70.5	88
Tarsus	34.5—41.2	37.8	51

Weights

All birds were caught from September to March and although there is a slight increase evident in the figures for February and March[†], the substantial premigratory increase in weight shown by Frith (loc. cit.) to occur in mid-March was not obtained.

Recoveries

Milledge (pers. comm.) has had no recoveries from the 171 birds banded by him in Tasmania,

Weight (grams)	Range	Mean	Number of Birds
September	127—165	154	6
October	128—162	150	12
November	129—164	149	14
December	137—155	146	6
January	125—175	148	20
February	158—179	165	9
March [†]	140—205	168	15

[†]The March figures are for the first week of the month, viz. 4 March 1978 only.

except those recaptured on the second or third day on which he banded. By comparison, of the 114 snipe banded in the Sydney district two "distant" recoveries have been reported from within Australia (both shot), another bird was recaptured 6.6 km from the banding place 14 months later and a fourth was recaptured at the banding place two weeks after banding. The details are set out in Table 1.

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