Schedule 2 Species Assessment Proforma – (Common) Snipe

Species	**(Common) Snipe *Gallinago gallinago***
Conservation status	BOCC status*:* **AMBER** due to its European threat status, a moderate (25-50%) decline in its non-breeding population over the last 25 years and a long-term moderate (25-50%) decline in its breeding range IUCN GB status*:* **VULNERABLE -** considered to have a **Vulnerable** non-breeding population due to a reduction (30-50%) in population size. Breeding population is of Least Concern. (Stanbury et al. 2021) IUCN Global status: **Least Concern** due to its extensive range and large populations (although overall population trend is one of decrease) (BirdLife International)
Habitat and diet	Snipe show a preference for marshy, boggy habitats, particularly when breeding, and will utilise a wide range of wet meadows and grazing marshes, heathlands and moorlands where suitable conditions occur. A wider range of wet habitats are occupied in winter, as birds may take advantage of any permanent or temporarily flooded or damp areas of land. Their diet comprises mostly of earthworm species that prefer waterlogged soils, and tipulid larvae. They require soil moist enough to allow them to probe for this prey at a depth they are able to reach. They will, however, also take surface and aquatic invertebrates (Hoodless *et al* 2007).
Migratory behaviour and movements	Snipe can be found throughout the UK all year round, although they have become increasingly restricted as breeding birds, especially in the lowlands. They have a prolonged breeding season, with the first eggs (including replacement clutches) being laid from the end of March to late June, with birds fledging as late as the 22 August (Joys & Crick 2004). Our resident breeding snipe are joined in the autumn by birds from northern Europe (Figure 1). Autumn movements begin in August and continue throughout September and October (Figure 2a and b). Most of the birds that breed in England are likely to be relatively sedentary, for example, moving only short distances from upland breeding areas to lowland/coastal sites in winter; Henderson et al. (1993) found that 93% of hunted birds that were ringed in Britain and Ireland during the breeding season were shot in Britain and Ireland. However, some birds move in a south-westwards direction to winter in SW England, Ireland, France and Iberia. In addition, a significant proportion of the birds that arrive here in the autumn from northern and eastern continental Europe move through and out of the country as the winter progresses (Wernham et al. 2002). The migration strategy of snipe may be more complex than has been previously understood. Analysis of more than 12,000 ringing recoveries from Poland suggests that the species may exhibit both leapfrog and parallel migrations. Birds thought to originate in central Russia and Belarus tend to migrate through central Poland towards western France, whilst birds thought to breed in Finland and northern Russia pass along the Polish coast towards northern France and the UK. Birds caught earlier in the

	season appear to travel a shorter distance than those caught later, suggesting that birds from further east and north travel to more westerly and southerly wintering grounds (Minias et al. 2011). Note: Birds of the much scarcer subspecies *faroeensis* which breeds in Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Orkney and Shetland Islands, also winter in Britain and Ireland, but little is known of their movements.
Population status (abundance and distribution)	The UK breeding population is estimated at 66,500 breeding pairs (GB = 64,500) (Woodward et al. 2020). Birds are thought to breed in lowland wet grassland, upland in-bye habitat, and wetter upland moor / rough grazing land (e.g. Wilson et al. 2005). The non-breeding population estimate is: UK - 1,100,000 individuals GB - 1,000,000 individuals[1] (Woodward *et al.* 2020) It should be noted that all of these estimates lack precision due to both the secretive habitats/cryptic nature of the species and the fact that many of their breeding habitats (especially in the uplands) are poorly monitored. The non-breeding estimate was rated as '3' by Frost *et al.* (2019) and Caulfield et al. (2025), i.e. 'not strongly based on actual count data and/or where large assumptions have been made and/or estimates suspected/known to be based on incomplete data'. Indeed, they did not feel able to refine the previous estimate produced by Musgrove *et al*. (2011) whose estimate of 1,042,169 individuals was based on the numbers shot (61,595 in 2004; PACEC 2006), the ring-recovery rate (3.6%; Wernham et al. 2002) and the proportion of ring-recoveries attributable to shooting (92%; Wernham et al. 2002), and an assumed likelihood that a bird ringed and then shot is subsequently reported to the BTO of 56% (as per Woodcock). However, they noted that the species' secretive nature and its occurrence throughout the wider countryside makes calculating population estimates particularly challenging, and it is possible that the actual population is significantly lower: WeBS data alone suggest a non-breeding population of about 10,000 birds, clearly a major underestimate, and the Dispersed Waterbirds Survey (Jackson et al. 2006) came up with an estimate of about 84,000 birds (confidence limits 51,000–140,000), which is also likely to be too low. A better understanding of the size of the non-breeding population is therefore needed to properly assess the impact of hunting on the species in England. Around a half of all UK 10km-squares were occupied by nipe during the breeding season in the last bird atlas (2007-11: Balmer et al. 2013), but the bulk of these were in the northern and western uplands of Britain (with Scotland a particular stronghold). In winter, 88% of UK 10-km squares were occupied (Balmer *et al.* 2013), reflecting the broader habitat associations outside the breeding season.

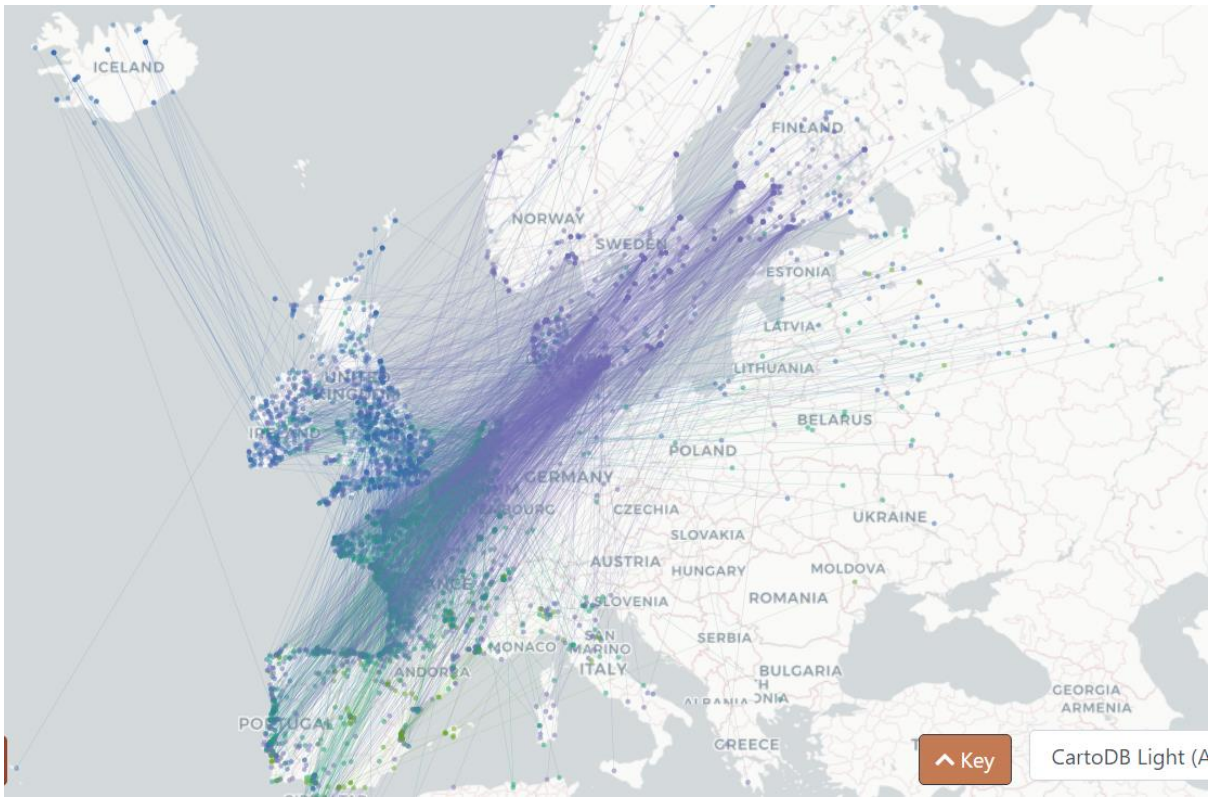
[1] Note that GB estimates for this species have been recently updated (Caulfield et al. 2025). The GB estimate remained at 1,000,000 individuals (peak mean 2017/18 to 2022/23), but as there has been no update to UK estimates, the reference to Woodward et al. (2020) remains relevant.

	The top sites in the UK for wintering snipe are all in England, as follows (5-year peak mean 2019/20 - 2023/24): Lower Derwent Ings: 999 Somerset Levels: 491Severn Estuary: 394 Southampton Water: 392 Severn Estuary (English counties): 370 Source: Calbrade et al. (2025)
Population trends	Whilst trends in upland breeding birds are largely unknown, we have a good understanding of population changes in those birds breeding in lowland wet grasslands thanks to a repeated national survey of such sites in England 20 years apart. This found a 62% decline in the numbers of breeding snipe between 1982 and 2002 (Wilson *et al*. 2005). Note, a further repeat of this survey took place in 2021/22 and the results are expected to be available in Spring 2026. Declines of birds breeding in upland areas of England are possibly of a similar magnitude, but unknown. Due to its habitat associations and distribution, snipe are poorly monitored by the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) but the latest report (Heywood *et al.* 2024) provides the following UK trends: 28 years 1995-2023: 17% increase 10 years 2013-2023: 8% increase 1 year 2023-2024: 16% decrease However, as all of these trends overlap (or include) zero, they suggest that there has been no significant change on the sites monitored. Furthermore, it is likely that the main period of decline in England's breeding snipe occurred before the start of the BBS (i.e. between the 1960s and 1990s, a major period of land drainage and agricultural intensification, especially in the lowlands). WeBS does not provide percentage changes in smoothed trends for this species, but 10- and 25-year patterns of change can be seen in Figure 3 (Calbrade et al. 2025), with a general decline over longer time-frames. There have been some notable changes in both the breeding and non-breeding distribution in recent decades, as measured by the number of occupied 10km-squares in the UK shown by the bird atlases (Balmer et al. 2013): % change in the breeding season 1968-72 to 2008-11: -31.5% % change in winter 1981-84 to 2007-11: +15.8% Range contraction of the breeding population has been especially pronounced in lowland areas – both the 1982 and 2002 surveys of lowland wet grassland sites found that around a half of the breeding pairs were located on just four key 'sites': Somerset Levels, Ouse Washes, Derwent Ings and Avon Valley. The breeding population of snipe in Scandinavia is showing a strong decline, with a similar broad decreasing trend across much of Europe (Lindström & Agrell 1999). However, the population of snipe in European Russia – which may be the source of the bulk of European wintering birds – appears to show no particular change in trend (Kuresoo *et al* 2011, Fokin & Blokhin 2013).
Drivers of population change	The causes of the large, historical decline in the breeding population of the English lowlands are well known, and relate to the loss, degradation and fragmentation of their favoured wet grassland haunts due to drainage and

	changes in land use and management (notably conversion to arable or intensively managed grassland). Whilst quantitative trend data relating to England's upland breeding snipe are scant, it is highly likely that the species has experienced significant declines related to the drainage and agricultural improvement of its favoured wet rough grazing and inbye habitats since the 1970s. Smart et al. (2008) found that snipe were more likely to persist in fields where the soil conditions were wet and soft. Soil softness increased with decreasing grazing pressure and increasing surface flooding. Soil moisture increased with surface flooding and was higher in organic soils. In places being actively managed for snipe, changes in field condition were consistent with decreases in grazing pressure and increases in surface flooding, so should have been beneficial to the species, but numbers continued to decline suggesting other factors must be involved (e.g. changes in other key aspects of habitat quality such as prey abundance, or changes in snipe productivity or mortality). Nest/chick predation is known driver of decline for other breeding waders that share the snipe's habitat, but there are no studies that show this to be a problem for the species. A study in Scotland suggests that grouse moor management (including predator control) may be beneficial to snipe (Ludwig et al. 2019) although a similar study in northern England did not show benefits for snipe (Fletcher et al. 2010). BTO Nest Record Scheme data show that daily failure rates at the egg stage appear to have more than halved since 1967 suggesting predation is not a cause of decline, at least at the nest (although this is based on a low sample size). Smart et al. (2014) examined the efficacy of agri-environment schemes (AES) and site protection for conserving lowland wet grassland breeding waders and found, in general, field occupancy was positively influenced by these two conservation delivery mechanisms, with the highest occupancy and breeding densities on land where site protection was combined with wader-specific AES options. On nature reserves, fields that were entered into AES between 2002 and 2009/10, were more likely to retain snipe and have positive population change. It is possible that changing weather patterns are having an impact on breeding snipe populations. As a species which is very dependent on wet conditions to find food, snipe may be particularly badly affected by long-term changes in precipitation, including increased occurrence of drought conditions. The snipe is a popular quarry species across many parts of Europe. In the early 1990s, BTO undertook an analysis of the 6,391 recoveries of snipe that they had collated from European ringing schemes, 85% of which were derived from hunting (Henderson *et al*. 1993). Of birds of known age, 59% of hunted individuals were first year birds, with 80% taken during September-February inclusive. By looking at the relative frequency of hunted versus non-hunted birds in the recoveries, they concluded that hunting pressure was greatest in France and lower in Britain, Ireland and Fennoscandia. They also suggested that hunting pressure on snipe in Europe had reduced overall since the 1950s. Snipe are known to be sensitive to shooting disturbance (Bregnballe et al. 2004).

Impacts from climate change	The IPCC (2023) have made predictions with high confidence that the future will see longer drought periods in our summers, such as we are already experiencing, but potentially becoming worse as global temperatures rise. Drier soils are a threat to the snipe since hardened earth is not possible to probe for prey items, and earthworms with a preference for waterlogged soils will be forced to move deeper to survive. Although they may eat surface invertebrates (Hoodless et al 2007), this does not currently make up a large proportion of their diet. Increased mortality from starvation of adults and particularly young may be considered a likely scenario. The trends towards high winter temperatures in northern Europe may mean that birds that breed at high latitudes tend to overwinter closer to their breeding grounds, although there is no hard evidence to support this for snipe. Snipe have been shown to arrive 10 days earlier in Estonia by the start of this century when compared with the 1930s: this is currently the only reference found indicating a change in migration phenology (Elts & Marja 2013).

Figure 1 Movements of Snipe in northern Europe based on ringing recoveries



Spina, F.[1], Baillie, S.R.[1], Bairlein, F[1], Fiedler, W. and Thorup, K. (Eds) 2022. The Eurasian African Bird Migration Atlas. https://migrationatlas.org.

Figure 2a

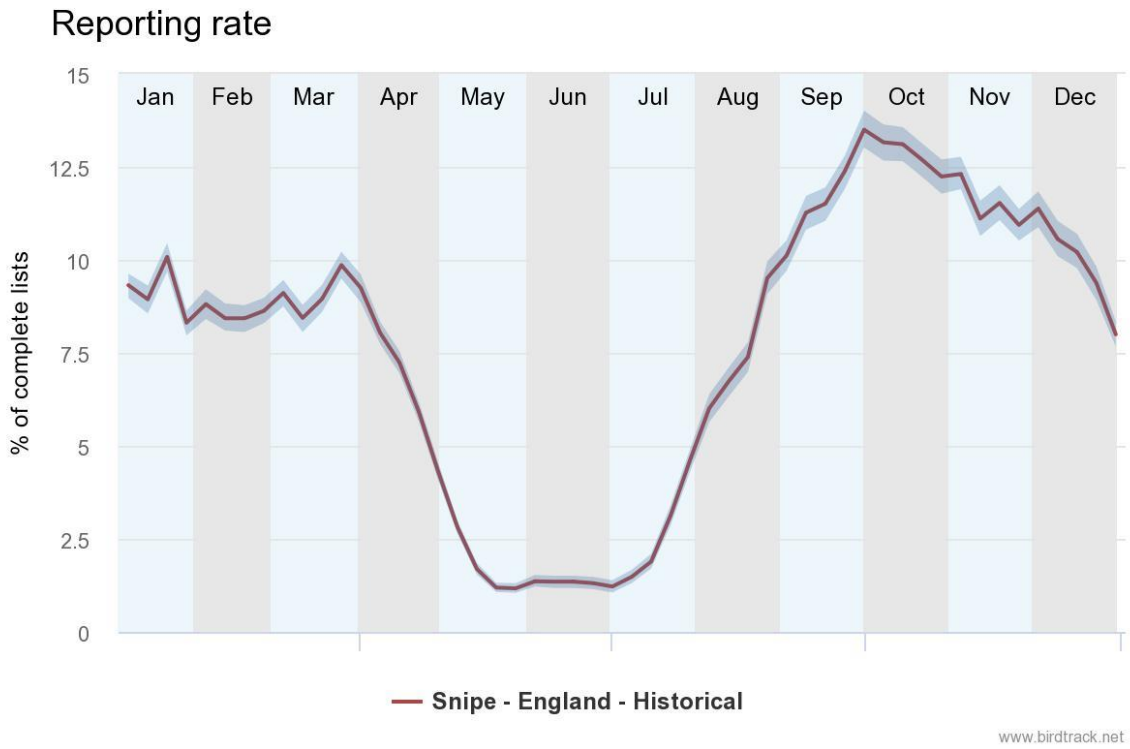


Figure 2b Likelihood of occurrence of Snipe in England by month

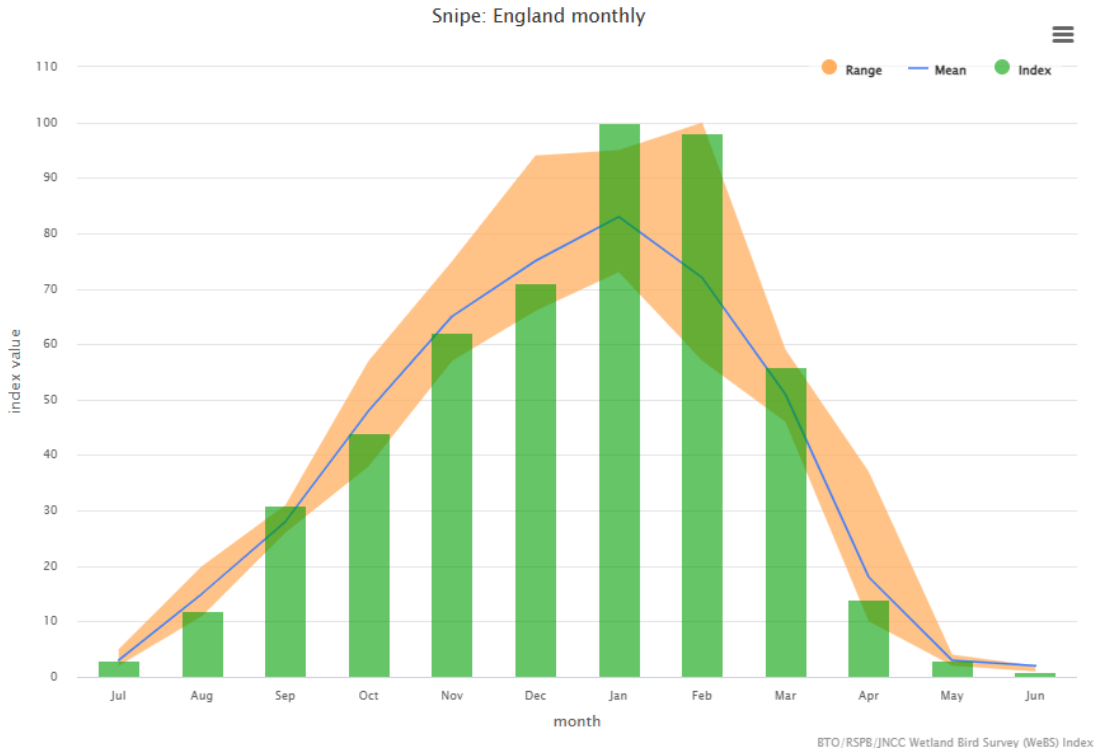
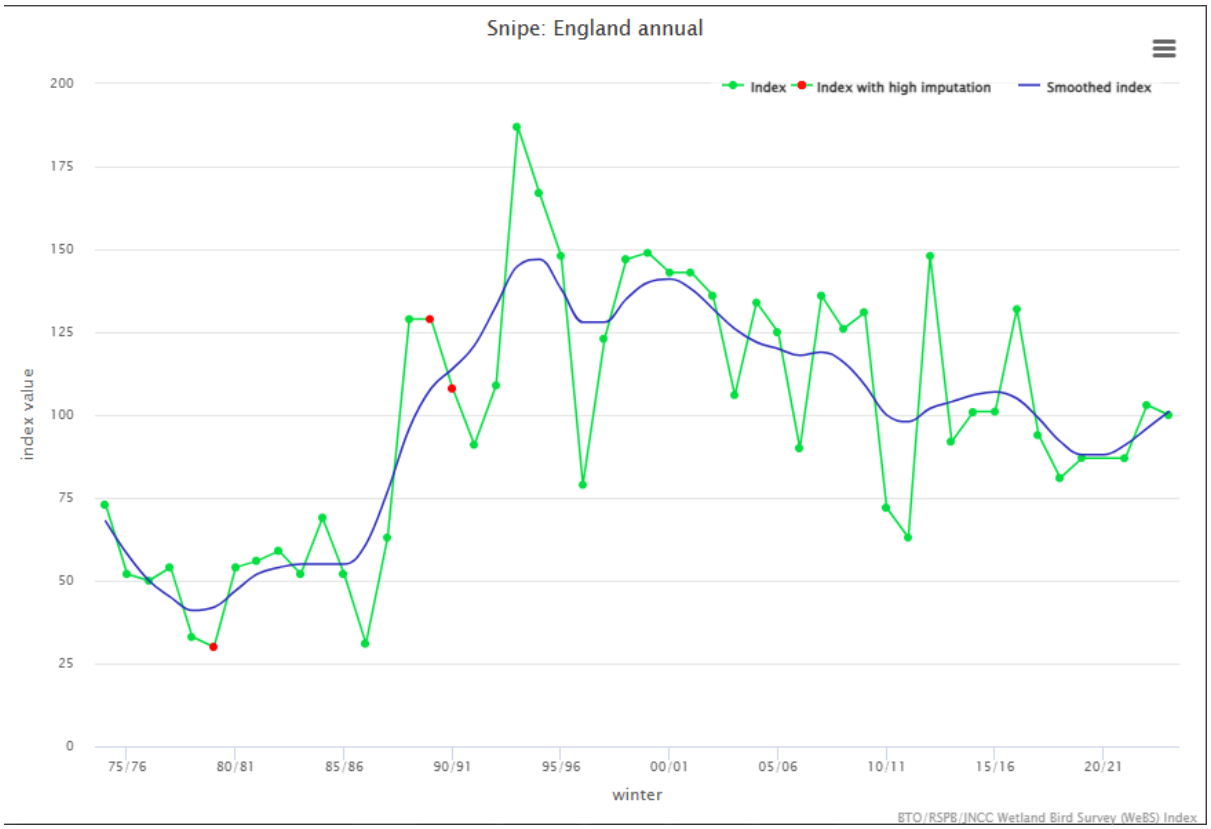


Figure 3 Trend in wintering Snipe abundance in England



Calbrade, N.A., Birtles, G.A., Woodward, I.D., Feather, A., Hiza, B.M., Caulfield, E.B., Balmer, D.E., Peck, K., Wotton, S.R., Shaw, J.M. & Frost, T.M. 2025. Waterbirds in the UK 2023/24: The Wetland Bird Survey and Goose & Swan Monitoring Programme. BTO/RSPB/JNCC/ NatureScot. Thetford.

Impacts of hunting on populations

Snipe is listed on Schedule 2 Part 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and is legal quarry outside the close season which runs from 1st February to 11th August. Given the prolonged breeding season of snipe, which means that young birds may not fledge until mid/late August (especially in more northerly/upland habitats), there is a high risk that birds shot early in the season could have dependent young. This goes against the principles of 'wise/sustainable use' of bird populations generally (and migratory waterbirds, in particular) enshrined within the Birds Directive and a number of International Multilateral Agreements to which the UK is a party/signatory to (including the Conventions on Biological Diversity (Rio 1992), Wetlands (Ramsar 1971) and the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (Bonn 1979), and the Agreement on the Conservation of African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbirds (AEWA)). These all state that recreational hunting should not take place during the pre-nuptial migration and breeding periods of quarry species. It is not clear why this mismatch has arisen, but it is assumed that it was set to align with the start of the open season for red grouse across the UK (12th August), which shares moorland habitats with snipe (therefore allowing snipe to be legally shot during the course of grouse shooting). It is worth noting that the open season for snipe in Northern Ireland starts on the 1st September (although it is currently the 12th August in both Scotland and Wales).

Aebischer (2019) estimated the size of the UK hunting bag for snipe as follows (with 95% confidence intervals shown in brackets):

2004: 64,000 (38,000-95,000) 2012: 100,000 (93,000-120, 000) 2016: 85,000 (28,000-130,000)

BASC and GWCT have produced the followed revised (unpublished) estimates of the size of the hunting bag for the UK and England based on data for the 2019 season (as supplied by Matt Ellis):

Scale	Lower 95% confidence interval	Estimate (2019)	Upper 95% confidence interval
UK	39,000	**58,000**	85,000
England	5,700	**13,000**	31,000

Snipe thus has a moderately large game bag in the UK, with the recent fall suggested by the data likely reflecting the decline in the UK non-breeding population (as shown by the WeBS data). The most recent analysis suggests that approaching a quarter of the total UK bag is taken within England.

As shown by the wide confidence intervals, there is a high degree of imprecision in the estimates of current UK waterbird harvest of this species. Using the latest published figure (for 2016) and the latest UK non-breeding population estimate (of 1.1m individuals), the % of the non-breeding population that is shot is likely to be somewhere between 2.5% and 12% (though this equates to c. 4 – 8.5% using the revised figures for 2019). However, Ellis and Cameron (2022) considered that there was low probability of an unsustainable harvest in the UK.

A further complication here (affecting both the assessments above) is the imprecision of the non-breeding population estimate, which was first made by Musgrove et al. (2011) and was heavily reliant on the 2004 hunting bag data and some assumptions regarding ringing recoveries. WeBS data suggests that the non-breeding population has declined significantly since these estimates were made.

The snipe present in the UK in the winter are a mix of the adult breeding population, that year's offspring and winter immigrants. Assessing the impact of hunting on the UK/English breeding population alone is therefore very difficult, as it is not possible to tell the origin of an individual snipe that has been shot unless it has been ringed or its feathers subject to stable-isotope analysis. It cannot be assumed that birds found during the winter in an area not used for breeding are immigrants, because resident breeders are known to move (especially to more southerly locations) within the UK in response to harsh winter weather causing frozen ground conditions. We also do not have data on when most snipe are shot in the season. Further research into the links between known bag returns and the temporal pattern of shooting, with subsequent feather stable-isotope analysis of resident/migrant birds, would improve understanding of the effects of shooting on the resident population and assist with future decision-making concerned with managing/mitigating any impacts of shooting on the species. Depending on the results of this work, changes to the Schedule 2 status (or voluntary measures) could be considered that may reduce the hunting pressure on resident birds and non-breeding immigrants.

Potential benefits to the species of a change to Schedule 2

Given the proportion of the non-breeding population that may be being shot each year, it is possible that the annual harvest includes a significant proportion of the declining, IUCN Vulnerable English/UK breeding population. Furthermore, according to WeBS data, the English non-breeding population has declined by approximately 40% in the last 25 years, which could reflect declines in the size of the overall population breeding in northern Europe, but may also result from birds

choosing to stay closer to their breeding grounds during the winter (i.e. short-stopping), although there is limited firm evidence to support this.

Whilst we have no information on the temporal pattern of hunting take across the open season, the combination of the snipe's prolonged breeding season and the large-scale historical declines in both the abundance and range in the breeding population in England, justifies consideration of extending the close season to 30th September, after which the main influxes of non-breeding birds commence. This would provide some protection to the largely resident English breeding birds and their offspring, and also facilitate recovery of the breeding population if other pressures (such as those relating to habitat extent and quality) are reduced. The lack of evidence for significant declines in the populations breeding across northern Europe, and the species' Least Concern status at European/global level, suggest that snipe should remain as a quarry species in England, although this should be reviewed in light of new evidence on population trends/a change in red list status in Europe/globally.

RECOMMENDATION

Extend the close season to 30 September, to reduce any possible impact of hunting on the largely resident and declining English breeding population and their offspring, and also facilitate recovery of the breeding population if other pressures are reduced.

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