

Brief reports by members based on their observations of nature

THE GREATER PAINTED-SNIPE

Rostratula benghalensis – a rare breeding resident

Photos and article by Sri Srikumar

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A Snipe is any of about 26 wading bird species in three genera in the family Scolopacidae. They are characterized by a very long, slender bill, eyes placed high on the head, and cryptic/camouflaging plumage. The Gallinago snipes have a nearly worldwide distribution, the Lymnocyrtes snipe is restricted to Asia and Europe and the Coenocorypha snipes are found only in the outlying islands of New Zealand. The four species of painted-snipes are not closely related to the typical snipes, and are placed in their own family, the Rostratulidae. Snipes have a distinctive round tipped bill that droops slightly, short legs and a round bulky body. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snipe>)

The Rostratulidae, commonly known as the painted-snipes, are a family of wading birds that consists of two genera: *Rostratula* and *Nycticryphes* (Wikipedia). Painted-snipes are shy denizens of rich, tropical freshwater wetlands. The Greater Painted-Snipe is one of seven snipe species that have been recorded in Sri



The Pin-tailed snipe is the most commonly seen migrant

Lanka. It is our only breeding resident. Three winter migrants are seen during the migrant season and three vagrants are rarely seen here.

| Common Name           | Scientific Name                | Resident Status   | Sightings              |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| Greater Painted-Snipe | <i>Rostratula benghalensis</i> | Breeding Resident | Rare                   |
| Pin-Tailed Snipe      | <i>Gallinago stenura</i>       | Winter Migrant    | The most commonly seen |
| Common snipe          | <i>Gallinago gallinago</i>     | Winter Migrant    | Rare but regular       |
| Jack Snipe            | <i>Lymnocyrtes mnimus</i>      | Winter Migrant    | Rare and irregular     |
| Wood Snipe            | <i>Gallinago nemoricola</i>    | Vagrant           | Very rare              |
| Swinhoe's Snipe       | <i>Gallinago megala</i>        | Vagrant           | Very rare              |
| Great Snipe           | <i>Gallinago media</i>         | Vagrant           | Vey rare               |

They are more or less of the same size (25 to 27 cm), with Jack Snipe being the smallest (17 to 19 cm), Great Snipe next (27 to 29 cm) and Wood Snipe being the largest (28 to 32 cm). In non-breeding plumage they are mostly brownish with streaks and patches of bright yellow or gold and black and a white belly. These

streaks and patterns are used to identify and differentiate them into their correct species. The earthy plumage provides them great camouflage in their usual wet, earthy habitats in marshes, paddy fields, grasslands and small water holes.

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One encounters them many times whilst walking on wet grasslands, while birding, and being taken by surprise repeatedly when they take flight literally from under one's feet. So very good is their camouflage that it takes quite a while furtively scanning the wet ground ahead to spot the one that took off and landed close by. Snipes were a popular game bird target for hunters

in the past and their camouflage helped them greatly to survive in addition to their erratic flight pattern which rendered them a difficult target. The difficulties involved in hunting snipes gave rise to the military term sniper which originally meant an expert hunter but later on evolved to mean a sharpshooter.



Greater painted snipe – the female in the left-hand image

The Greater Painted Snipe, our local star, is more visible during the mating season. Surprisingly it is the female that is endowed with the brighter, colourful, fancy plumage while the male, though with a bit more

pronounced colours than usual, is quite plain in comparison. This reversal is not only in their plumage but also in their courtship, mating, brooding and parenting behaviour.

Their non-breeding plumage, in which they are more or less commonly seen, makes it very difficult to clearly differentiate them in the field. By Rule of Thumb, the most commonly seen in Sri Lanka is the Pin-Tailed Snipe and it is only a very experienced birder who would be able to clearly identify the correct species. Their under-wing patterns being different helps to identify them when in flight.



his wings held up, showing his interest (right).

White patches under their wings contrast with the otherwise drab brown background of their habitat to make their flashing displays more noticeable. Upon pairing they, literally, run off together to frolic and mate. Their nest is made of reeds and other vegetation on the slightly raised wet ground protected by the surrounding small random pools of water.

After pairing off and the nuptials, the female lays eggs which are fondly brooded by the adoring male, while the female dances away to entice other males in the vicinity, who also fall prey to the frivolousness of the captivating female. Oh! she dances and prances and

### Courtship and Nesting

The more attractive looking female prances with her wings held up (left), like a ballerina, capturing the attention of the males close by. A tussle among the males ensues and the stronger more mature male manages to fend off the competitors and claims the coveted prize. During courtship the male also displays with



captivates the helplessly adoring males and leaves them with the burden of brooding and caring for the young offspring while she is off again. Wow! what a hot chick.



The male looks after the hatchlings, adopting the usual role of the female, until they are mature and begin to feed on their own. The adoring father is very good at parenting.

This polyandrous behaviour and role reversal is also observed among the Barred Button Quail. It is an instance when the exception proves the rule.

They are insectivorous and feed on insects, worms, snails, crustacea, larvae, grubs and small fish. They are found either solitary or in loosely scattered small flocks in the same locality.



Greater painted snipe



The above account is based mostly on personal observations made from time to time, supplemented by information from the Internet. All the photographs were taken by me, mostly at Yoda Wewa, Tissamaharama and at Kumana Villu, Kumana NP. – Sri Srikumar, 2025.

<https://www.inaturalist.org/taxa/3999-Rostratula-benghalensis>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snipe>

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