

# Species Action Plan



Last updated: January 2024

**Common name:** Snipe

**Scientific name:** *Gallinago gallinago*

**Conservation status:** Classified in the UK as 'Amber' under the Birds of Conservation Concern 4: the Red List for Birds (2021).

**Shropshire conservation status:** Fairly common winter visitor, rare breeding species. Classified as 'Red'-listed in Shropshire. Shropshire Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) Priority Species.

**Habitat:** In winter, the snipe is primarily associated with lowland and coastal pools and marshes. In late March or April, the breeding population return to breeding sites – now largely focussed on upland areas – where acid and wet flushes on moorlands, wet rough grassland and wet rush pastures with shallow pools provide suitable breeding habitats. The birds nest in simple scrapes on the ground within these areas.

**Food:** Snipe use their long bill to probe soft mud for invertebrate food, meaning that wet soil conditions are a critical feeding requirement and the birds are susceptible to drying of habitats.

**UK trends:** Breeding snipe have declined dramatically in the UK, largely driven by drainage of wetlands, conversion of grassland to arable and wider agricultural intensification.

**County trends:** Dramatic declines have also occurred in Shropshire, reflecting UK trends. In the early 1990s, the population was estimated at 200-300 pairs. The 2004 *Shropshire Breeding Snipe Survey* estimated only 20-25 breeding pairs in the county, with a strong bias towards the Long Mynd and other upland areas.

Land drainage, loss of wet grassland habitats and grazing pressure in the uplands have all been cited as reasons for the county decline. Climate change and nest predation may also be playing a role.



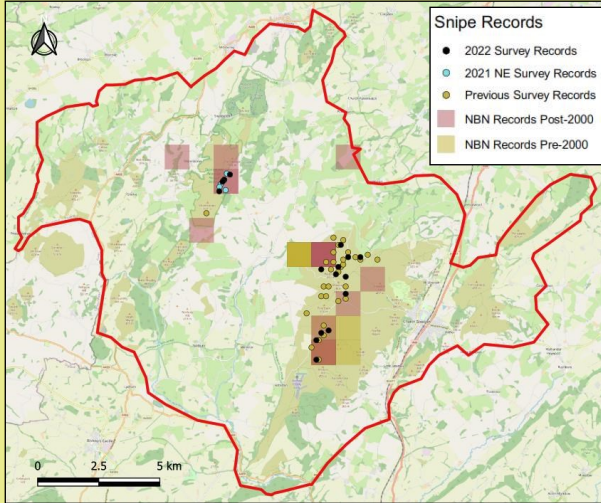
Snipe



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# Distribution of Snipe in the Stepping Stones Project Area



The Stepping Stones Project Area includes the two remaining strongholds for snipe in Shropshire – the Long Mynd and Stiperstones. Recent survey work (2021/2022) indicates that the Long Mynd supports 11-13 territories, with the Stiperstones having 4-5 pairs, together accounting for more than 80% of the county's breeding population.

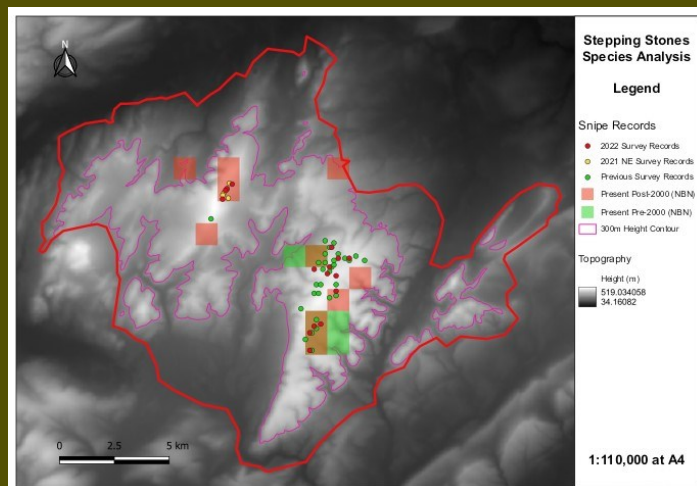
The current numbers of breeding snipe on both the Long Mynd and Stiperstones actually represent a minor increase over recent years, brought about as a result of rush cutting work at a number of sites on the Long Mynd and a combination of rush cutting and re-wetting work on the Stiperstones.

Previous survey records from within the Project Area are important in identifying areas both for further survey and study, and habitat restoration hotspots to encourage the return of breeding Snipe. The map above shows previous records on both the Stiperstones and Long Mynd, as well as 1km records from locations outside of their strongholds. This information, together with the Opportunity Mapping produced by the Stepping Stones Project will

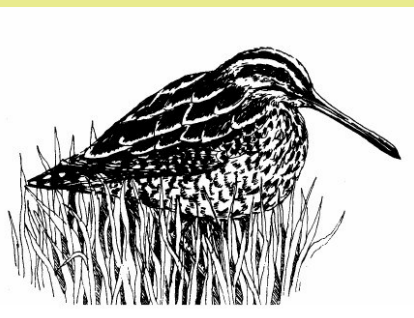
## Habitat Management & Restoration in the Uplands

Within the Project Area, remaining breeding snipe populations are strongly associated with the uplands of the Long Mynd and Stiperstones. Recent breeding territories all occur above 300m altitude (pink line) on the plateau or gently sloping areas of the uplands.

Species-specific conservation works for snipe have been taking place at these sites for several years, and these will continue to be developed and refined at both sites over the lifespan of the project, to protect and enhance their upland strongholds. A case study from the Long Mynd is provided on



## Expanding the Range of Snipe in the Project Area



Remaining breeding territories now largely occur on upland moorland with **wet flushes, rush pasture and pools**. On the Stiperstones, territories also extend over areas of **wet grassland** on the fringes of the site. Formerly, this species would have occurred across a wider range of damp habitats, including **lowland wetlands**, and an important part of this Action Plan will be to consider habitats throughout the Project Area and look to where creation or restoration of **rush pasture and wetlands** can be implemented on farmland or marginal habitats to provide suitable breeding conditions for this declining species.

Previous work on the Long Mynd has shown the importance of opening up suitable snipe feeding areas in dense wet rush pastures, leading to their use as breeding territories. **Re-wetting** of suitable pastures within the Project Area can also lead to a return to use by snipe, as has been shown on the Stiperstones.



# Case Study—Management for Snipe on the Long Mynd

Rushes, particularly soft rush *Juncus effusus* are widespread on the Long Mynd plateau and form an important part of the habitat mosaic of the site. In many areas, however, stands of rush have developed into a dense, continuous sward, reducing habitat diversity and contributing to a partial drying of wetland areas. Whilst snipe benefit from an element of rush cover, helping to avoid nest predation by mammals, open wetland areas within rush pasture and flushes are essential to breeding snipe and their young, since they rely on wet ground to successfully probe for invertebrate food.

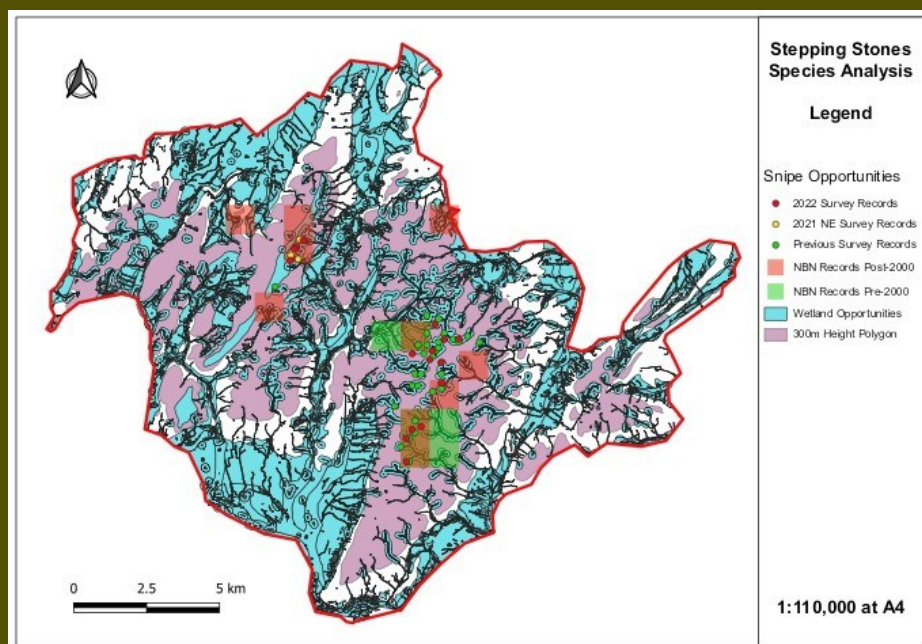
Rush cutting was initiated on the Long Mynd in 2008 within known breeding territories, outside of the breeding season, and has since been expanded to open up new areas. Areas are chosen where: (i) large areas of dense rush cover occur and a build up of dead vegetation makes it impossible for snipe to feed in these areas; and (ii) the ground underfoot is wet and where clearance results in a high water table with areas of standing water for feeding.



Recent results have been positive, with an increase in snipe territories since 2019. To date, however, no research or analysis has been conducted to look at site selection, uptake of cleared areas, map habitat characteristics or determine drivers of success. This work will be a key objective going forwards to help inform site location, cut size, and the future management of the upland stronghold for breeding Snipe.

## Opportunity Mapping of Wetland Areas for Snipe

Alongside research into the characteristics of snipe breeding habitat and the effectiveness of habitat management interventions in their upland strongholds, the Opportunity Mapping developed as part of the Stepping Stones Project will be used to help determine the best locations for future habitat management works, both in the uplands and throughout the wider Project Area.



**Left:** Wetland Opportunities in the Project Area overlaid with existing records of snipe.

**Above:** Close-up of Long Mynd area showing current and previous snipe territories in wetland opportunity areas.

Whilst upland management for snipe remains a priority, other sites may provide current and future opportunities for this species, and should be ground surveyed for their potential. These include land to the east of the Lawley and Caer Caradoc, and Stapeley Common. To focus in further on potential sites, a scoring system for snipe wetland opportunities will be developed, and used as a basis for ground survey of Opportunity Wetlands to determine their suitability for new snipe breeding habitat.



## Conservation Objectives for Snipe

- Maintain an accurate, up-to-date record of the distribution of breeding snipe in the Project Area.
- Conduct research to establish best practice in the management of upland snipe habitats in the Project Area, to inform delivery of successful, cost-effective management interventions for snipe.
- Identify suitable sites and restore or create habitat for breeding snipe to increase the overall number of breeding pairs in the Stepping Stones Project Area.
- Raise awareness of the status and habitat needs of snipe amongst farmers and landowners through a targeted programme of management advice and practical management support.

## Conservation Actions for Snipe

- By March 2024, prepare a *SAP Summary Factsheet for Snipe* for dissemination to farmers, landowners, wildlife groups and other interested parties, which summarises the species and provides advice for the creation and management of habitats to encourage breeding snipe.
- Conduct annual breeding snipe surveys on the Long Mynd and Stiperstones to identify territories and numbers, following a standard methodology. Report findings to Stepping Stones annually.
- Carry out a walkover survey of Stapeley Common to identify the most likely areas for breeding snipe to occur at the site. Map suitable habitats and conduct breeding snipe surveys of the site in 2023 to determine presence/absence of breeding birds from this site.
- Conduct surveys of at least 4 new sites/year to determine presence/absence of breeding snipe.
- During 2023, conduct a literature-review of existing studies and academic journals on the management of habitats for breeding snipe and prepare a summary report based on the findings.
- Conduct a research project to map habitats and determine site characteristics in breeding territories on the Long Mynd, and analyse results to determine significant factors in habitat composition. Use results to guide future conservation management interventions for snipe.
- Use Opportunity Mapping, aerial mapping and field survey to identify and rank potential sites for habitat restoration and creation beyond the existing breeding distribution.
- Conduct rush cutting and removal on at least 10 suitable sites/year on the Long Mynd, to improve the value of these areas for breeding Snipe and support the recovery of breeding pairs at the site.
- Liaise with relevant landowners and ground truth all sites identified with 'high' habitat suitability to evaluate their potential for habitat management/creation to encourage breeding snipe.
- Carry out habitat creation or restoration works for snipe on 2 sites per year and review annually.

## About Stepping Stones

Stepping Stones is an innovative landscape-scale conservation programme. The aim is to connect wildlife habitats by strengthening or creating 'stepping stones' and corridors of habitat between the Long Mynd and Stiperstones, and beyond. In practice, this means creating and linking areas of heathland, flower-rich grasslands and broadleaved woodland by a network of wildlife-rich hedgerows, road verges, hillsides, streamside wetlands and strong riparian corridors.



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