

Bird Notes for Hikers May 2, 2020

Woodcock & Snipe

The American Woodcock and Wilson's Snipe are similar birds: chubby, short legs, long bill for probing the mud; both have aerial displays. They belong to the Shorebird group and both inhabit wet areas: marshes, wet meadows, pools, open swamps. They can be confused, but the sounds they produce make them easier to separate than appearance alone.

They both can flush from the ground in wet areas: Snipe make a raspy call when they flush; the Woodcock's wings make a twittery noise when they flush.

The aerial displays are quite different. Although Woodcock display at dawn and dusk, and Snipe display all day, they can overlap. The male Snipe display is a swooping flight, up and down, up and down, called winnowing. On the accelerating down swoop, the air rushing by the outer tail feathers produces a woo sound; the beating wings break the air flow to make the sound go woo, woo, woo.

The male Woodcock chooses a display site on the ground where it sits and makes its repeated peent call. Eventually it takes flight and circles high into the air, its outer wing feathers making a twittering noise. At the peak it also makes a series of chirps, then drops silently back to its ground location and continues peenting.

Stew Hamill