

the secret life of SNIPES

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHEM COMPION • TEXT BY PHIL HOCKEY

The African Snipe Gallinago nigripennis has an extensive range, from Ethiopia south to the Cape, but its breeding biology and movement patterns remain surprisingly little known. This is due in part to its inaccessible marshland habitat and to its crepuscular habits. ▶







Snipes are perhaps best known for their drumming displays, executed in a steep dive. They

are performed by males (in some snipe species occasionally also by females) at the start of the breeding season, and are accompanied by a rather deep, eerie, winnowing sound, which lasts about 10 seconds. As the display proceeds, the sound increases steadily in volume.

In parts of northern Germany, locals thought that the sound of a drumming snipe was made by the goats of the thunder god, Donar, as they pulled his chariot across the sky. This belief gave rise to the local vernacular name of *donnerziege* (thunder goat). In Ireland too, snipes are known as 'little goats of the air'. In reality, the drumming noise is not a call at all – it is a mechanical sound created by air passing rapidly over the stiffened and specially modified outer tail feathers. These are held at right angles to the body as the bird dives (*shown left*). Drumming displays are best seen and heard early in the morning or in the hour before sunset. When the moon is bright, displays sometimes continue throughout the night.

African Snipes cock and fan their tails in several different contexts. These

include territorial defence and pre-copulatory display. It is suspected, although not proven, that males also cock and fan their tails as part of a pair-formation ritual, sometimes raising them past the vertical, as seen here.

In addition, during the breeding season, pairs sometimes perform synchronised, undulating flights over their territory (*see previous spread*). It is possible that these too are linked to pair formation and possibly to pair bonding. As yet, however, their true function remains one of the snipe's mysteries. ▷



African Snipes are monogamous and, although it is the male who performs most of the breeding and territorial

displays, nest-building is almost certainly the responsibility of the female. The nests vary considerably in size and bulk, and are usually placed over shallow water, often in a tuft of grass or sedge. The female is also responsible for most or all of the incubation. When crouched over the eggs, the combination of her complex upperpart coloration, the grassy nesting material and the surrounding vegetation (which sometimes overhangs the nest) makes the incubating female very difficult to see. □