Alabama wing-shooters can enjoy hunting two bird species that receive very little attention, but each can provide incredibly fun and challenging action.

“Woodcock and snipe populations are both looking good,” commented Seth Maddox, assistant chief of the Wildlife Section for the Alabama Division of Wildlife & Freshwater Fisheries. “Both birds look similar, but are a little different and use different habitats. Snipe like a lot wetter habitat than woodcock. Woodcock like a little drier habitat, but still close to water.”

Woodcock

Both species tend to hold tight until someone almost steps on them. Then, they explode from cover in a flurry of feathers, vault up into the person’s face and rocket off erratically displaying arial skills any fighter pilot must envy. The word “sniper,” describing a military marksman, originated with sportsmen skilled enough to regularly hit snipe.

Woodcock migrate from their breeding grounds in Canada, the Midwest and New England to the Gulf Coast every winter. The best hunting normally occurs right before or after a severe cold front passes through northern states, pushing birds south.

“For the last couple of years, we have been banding woodcock and putting little GPS tracking devices on them,” remarked Jared Knight, the Alabama district wildlife biologist in Spanish Fort. “They migrate such great distances. We caught them at Portland Landing Special Opportunity Area at night. We find them near open agricultural fields with some forest close by.”

Woodcock thrive in hardwood bottomlands with damp soils and dense underbrush. A clear-cut regrowing with vegetation creates an ideal place to find woodcock. The small birds habitually fly to open fields to feed at night and return to their thickets at daybreak.

“I’ve seen a slight uptick in interest for hunting snipe and woodcock around the Mobile-Tensaw Delta and along the Perdido River,” Knight remarked. “Woodcock are mostly in the Upper Delta and snipe down in the marshes. Both are a lot of fun to hunt if someone can find a good spot.”

Woodcock require damp, soft dirt where they can use their long dexterous bills to probe for earthworms. A woodcock can eat its weight in worms each day.

“Woodcock prefer thicker habitat, but still pretty wet,” Maddox said. “People can find woodcock in most of our wildlife management areas with some type of water and thicker habitat like stream-side management zones and water edges with thicker cover. Any area that holds quail probably also

A snipe feeds in a soggy field. Snipe probe for worms and other organisms in soft mud. They thrive in marshes, wet cow pastures, bogs, spongy meadows, fallow fields, damp crop fields, soft muddy shorelines of rivers and lakes or any other mushy spots where they can find moist soil and probe for food with their bills.

Little birds create big excitement

by JOHN N. FELSHER
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