

# Snipe

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*Gallinago gallinago*

Art by ERICA READ



GERRY CAMBRIDGE

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Finding a snipe's nest is hardly a doddle –  
for one, you can't see the skulkers, richly-striped,  
in all that marsh or sphagnum  
to watch them back (which is not to answer  
why you would want to find). One way is chance –  
to tramp all over promising ground  
till the heart-thud featherburst up from your feet  
and there it is, the clutch! Brown, pear-shaped,  
in fours, black-spotted, delighting  
like a sonnet for symmetry, hot with the bloodyolk lightning  
of embryonic snipeishness.

Or take an excitable dog, or with a friend  
quarter the squelching land with a length  
of tautened rope between you tied to the bottom  
ends of a pair of poles. You can tell they're nesting  
by the speck in the sky at dusk, thrumming  
down at the earth with a weird, wavering hum –  
the stiff, outermost feather each side of his tail  
swung out, vibrating in the vertical dive. *Gallinago  
coelestis*, once, the 'hen of heaven', except  
one thinks of it more as reclusive, exploding  
up from your feet to a zigzagging dot and gone  
with a repetitious cry as if you had stepped on its toes.  
But it'll be back down soon as it can –  
no glide, just an unceremonious drop  
with abruptly-folded wings.

Caricature-billed as if evolution forgot  
to flip the off-switch, now the bird's stuck  
with this prodding, too-long, horny appendage, blunt  
sword that has the whole earth for a scabbard, plunged  
right to the hilt, almost up to its nervily-vigilant eyes.  
Shock-stilled, held, it would be breathtaking  
russets, browns, cream-striped barrings,  
small piece of palpitant intricate earth-life  
out of escaped and rainridden days.  
Here's to the snipe in its disregard.