RECENT RESEARCH

Snooping for Snipes: America's Favorite Wild Goose Chase

By David Chinery

(Ed. Note — This paper was written while the author was a student in an undergraduate American folklore course taught at Rutgers University in 1985 by Sue Samuelson. Since very little has been published on snipe hunts, it is hoped that this paper will encourage further consideration of the history and function of the custom.)

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So when he was setting up his hammock in the camp, two of us went out, and we found a good spot in the woods, about 300 yards from camp (we didn't want to put him out too far), where it looked like there might be snipe. Chip (that was the guy I went with) took a stick and drew a path in the underbrush so it looked like something had been going through there. We came back and told Chris that we found a snipe trail, and we were going snipe hunting.

About 9 o'clock that night (maybe it was around 9:30 — it gets dark late out there) we gave Chris a bag, and I guess about 8 of us went out into the woods with him. We took him to the place and it was just light enough so you could just see the trail, and we showed him the trail. No, no, it was dark so we had to show him it with the flashlight. So we showed him the snipe trail and told him, "When you hear us coming your way, just hold the bag in front of the trail and the snipe will run into it."

So we left him there, sitting on a log, and it was really pitch black, there weren't any stars in the sky. You couldn't even see in front of your own face, and we went around, with sticks and pots and pans, banging on trees and rattling stuff and yelling, "Snipe, snipe!" trying to flush the snipe out. We worked around him, then we finally gradually got further away, and we got lost in the process so we have to have him hold up his light so we could re-orient ourselves, but we finally just faded out and went back to camp. We would have left him out there all night except the professor that was with us was afraid of lawsuits, so after about 2 hours we went out there and got him. He was disappointed because he thought we were really going to catch a snipe. During the part where we asked him to hold up the light he figured the snipe was coming for sure and he got all ready with the bag. He took it all really well. Dumbest biology major I ever met!"[5]

Although these recollections may vary in detail, the basic elements are still present. Snipe hunts occur in the woods at night. Indeed, the first informant I interviewed said, "You couldn't have a snipe hunt in New Brunswick." Although the Jennings account goes further to put the scene in a swamp, this may or may not be an important detail (as we will see later), just as long as a dark, forested setting is used. There is always at least one leader, sometimes more than one, and the leader(s) may sit back and conduct the joke from the safety of the campfire or venture along with the victims and participate in the action. It is crucial that no one lets on to what is about to happen and that all bystanders who know the prank either help in setting up the hunt or at least remain uninvolved. Most people who have already been out sniping are eager to play along — notice how 9 of the Texas Rangers quickly signed onto the expedition, eight of the Georgia student played along, and my group was offered much enthusiasm and encouragement. Unlike other jokes, which may make a person laugh several times because he forgets he already had heard the punch line, a prank like a snipe hunt requires that its victim be a true "greenhorn" because it is an event that will not be quickly forgotten. Disturbing the underbrush in the area seems to be an integral part of each account also. It gave both the Rangers and the Georgia students an escape route while their friends wait for the game to come running, and it provides the people in the other versions with another method of finding their prey besides using the snipe call. "Beating the bushes," often said figuratively while looking for someone or something, is taken literally in this case and to the greenhorns it seems like a reasonable method for finding snipes. Also common to all of the narratives is the end result of the snipe hunt — absolute mirth and laughter on the part of the tricksters, while the victims either fake it and laugh along or remain sheepishly embarrassed. Reck gets even with his friends by dumping a sack full of biting black Texas ants on them, but most victims are not as cruel (or as fortunate) and just forget the episode until the next camping trip or devise a more subtle revenge.

Along with the similarities, there are significant differences between the four accounts collected. Probably the most important of these is whether the victim actually knows what a snipe is. Reck has been on a real snipe hunt before, and he knows what a snipe is. Reck has been on a real snipe hunt before, and he knows that a snipe is a shy bird that lives under brush in moist, low-lying areas. Hence, his friends *must* bring him to a swamp, where there is a chance the birds will actually be living, and they are sure to bring the sack along so it appears they will have something to catch the bird in and transport it back to camp with. They also give him the "easier" job of holding the sack while they stumble around in the underbrush, trying to chase the birds toward him, and this makes sense to Reck. Since he knows what a snipe is, the pranksters must make it seem like this could be a plausible method for operating a snipe hunt.

In the more recent versions of the snipe hunt, none of the victims know what a snipe might even resemble. Because of this lack of knowledge, the hunt may be simplified greatly, and another dimension of excitement (or frustration) is added for the victims, because they have no idea how ferocious or docile the temperment of the snipe may turn out to be in reality. The hunt can be conducted in any type of woods because the participants are unaware of what type of environment a snipe may inhabit. The Texas Rangers did not call out "Here snipe, here snipe!" as the members of the other stories did, because they knew that Reck would realize that human voices would frighten a wild animal. But by adding the yelling aspect to the hunt, the modern pranksters have even more to laugh about. The call was crucial in my story where the instigators of the hunt did not lead at all but instead listened

(continued on back)

from a distance, and the call helped them participate in the hunt. If the Rangers had not brought a sack along with them, Reck would have wondered exactly how they were going to catch the birds. But in the majority of the newer episodes, the sack becomes a less important part of the prank; the victims do not know what they are looking for, so it is not surprising that they fail to ask how they are going to obtain a handhold on the animal once they spot it. The Georgia account remains remarkably similar to the Texas story in many of the details, and this possibly is true if the prank is used more in the South and has thus retained more of its content. However, this research cannot truly make any strong conclusions of this type. Another reason for the differences may be due the creation of a more urbanized participant who knows less about the outdoors than his predacessors did.

The reasons for staging snipe hunts have probably not changed over the years, and the foremost purpose they are held is certainly for the sheer amusement of the pranksters. Both of the informants, the printed story, and my own recollections report hysterical laughter at the conclusion of each episode, and the pranksters often have a good snicker at the expense of the victim before and during the hunt. The gleeful exclamation of "Sucker!" by the Cook student in Georgia testifies to this. Even though most of the laughter is mercilessly directed toward the victim because of his gullability, many of the pranksters probably feel that they are "getting even" with the people who took them on their own first snipe hunt, and this is another good reason for repeating the joke, although probably an unconscious one. It also passes on a camping tradition, and in this sense the snipe hunt may be just as important to seasoned, experienced campers as other traditions may be to other special interest, ethnic, or religious groups. In addition, the event brings a group of people together more closely, and may serve to break tension or acquaint newcomers in a group where everyone may not be on comfortable terms.

In questioning why someone could be fooled into going on a snipe hunt, the main drive for participation is probably curiosity. For those who have no idea what a snipe is, there is an element of the unknown, of possible excitement and adventure, that may spur them on to take part in this new sport. Peer pressure may also account for the victim's inclusion in the event, although they may be afraid of the woods at night or have no particular desire to find out what a snipe is, not to mention catch one. However, they go along with the group, so as to fit in and be accepted as an "insider rather than as an outsider." Often, the snipe hunt is an activity that the group is involved in at the time, so everyone participates. There are not too many options as to what to do at night in the woods.

A possible origin for the somewhat mystical nature regarding snipes is found in a legend collected by Mary Alicia Owen and presented in her book *"Voodoo Tales: As Told Among the Negroes of the Southwest,* first published in 1894. The legend is entitled "The Snipe," and provides information on the origins and explanations of its shy, hermit-like behavior and its preference for a swamp habitat.[6] The tale does not reveal any obvious connections on the origin of snipe hunting, but its area of collection (Missouri) hints that the prank may have originated in the South.

Continuation of this research would have to include collecting many more versions of the snipe hunt from analysis. Possibly a survey studying the areas in the United States in which the snipe hunt is most popular would test the hypothesis of a southeastern or south-central origin. In any event, snipe hunts will continue to amuse and embarrass campers, whatever the custom's implications or origins.

NOTES

[1]Chandler S. Robbins, Bertel Brunn, and Herbert S. Zim, *A Guide to Field Identification of Birds in North America* (New York: Golden Press, 1966), p. 126.

[2]N. A. Jennings, "A Texas Ranger," in *A Treasury of American Folklore*, ed. B. A. Botkin (New York: Crown, 1944), pp. 383-385.

[3]Personal memoirs, November 8, 1875.

[4]Interview with Eunice A. Long, November 13, 1985.

[5]Interview with Lisa May Connolly, November 26, 1985.

[6]Mary Alicia Owen, *Voodoo Tales — As Told Among the Negroes of the Southwest* (New York: Negro University Press, 1969), pp. 261-265.

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