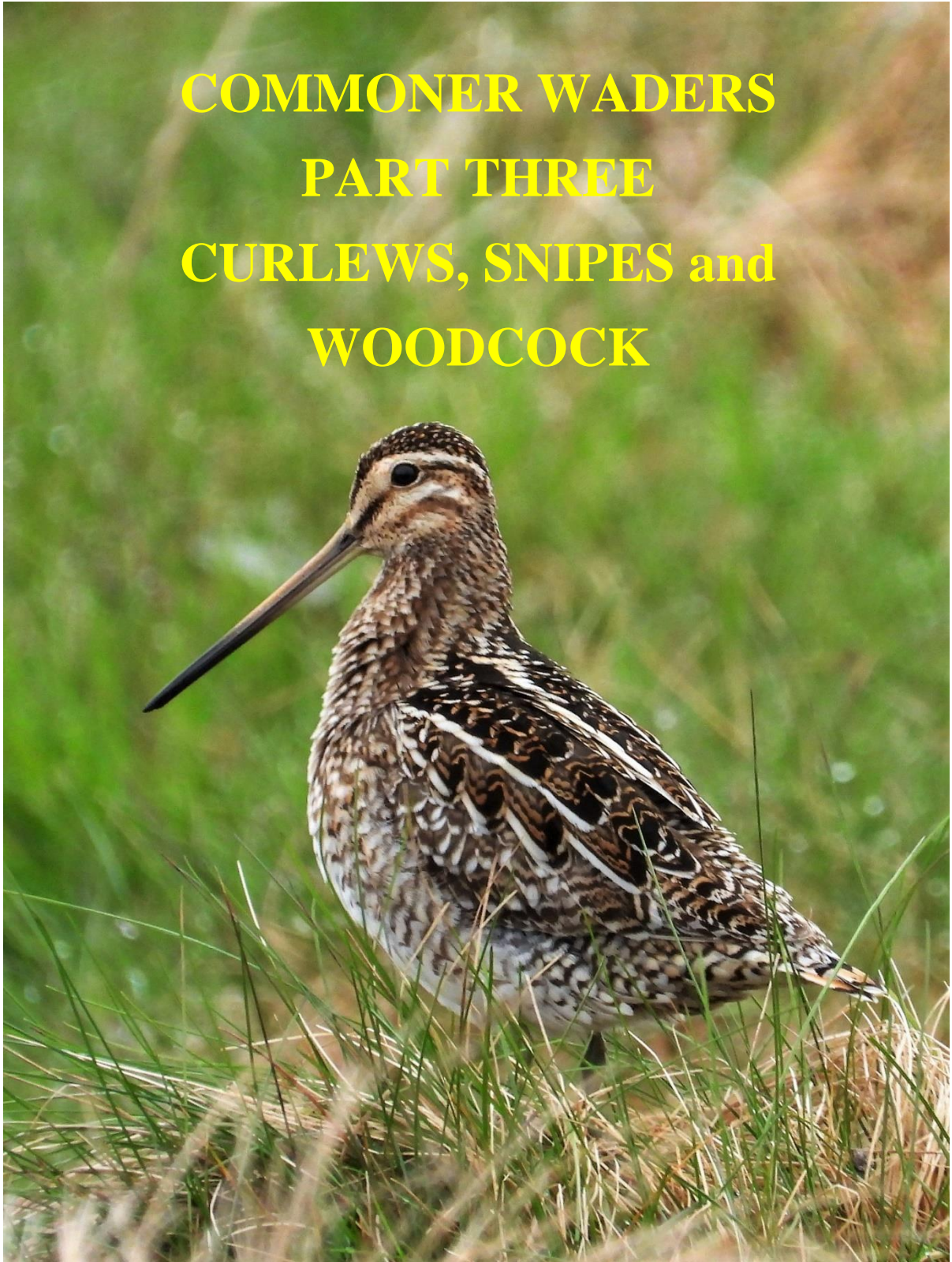


COMMONER WADERS
PART THREE
CURLEWS, SNIPES and
WOODCOCK



Steve Holmes

The UK can boast of an impressive list of 78 species of wader, though only 18 breed. Of the remainder, more than 40 are very rare migrants and thus fall outside our scope here. Personally, I've seen 59 in UK and on a World basis, I'm actually only 'missing' two, which are both now considered extinct (Eskimo Curlew for certain and Slender-billed Curlew almost certainly, though one reported in France in 2020). Species such as **Oystercatcher** and **Avocet** are not included since they have absolutely no confusion species and 'commoner' equates to common hereabouts.

Whilst all the ID help anyone might need is widely available in books and the Internet, what follows is invariably written in 'plain', hopefully easy to understand language, with minimal use of any technical, possibly confusing body part terms.

Curlew: Uncommon resident (on the UK amber list) numbers swelled by autumn immigrants that overwinter; formerly much commoner. **Largest** UK wader.

Brown, streaked both above and below, with **white** only from **legs back to undertail**. **Long**, decurved bill, **longer in females shorter in males and juveniles** but confusingly, there's **overlap**. Mostly brown with a **paler base**. Certainly any individual with a hugely long bill is safely a female but short-billed individuals are probably best left as 'Curlew'. Such small-billed birds can be confused with Whimbrel but **head pattern** helps in separation. Head **plain**, with fine streaking.

Calls include the well-known "**cur-lee**" whereas the song is a superb affair, being a long, bubbling trill delivered whilst in flight. Wings above are **darker on the outer half**, otherwise **paler**; underwings similar, **white on the inner half**, otherwise pale brown. **White triangle** up the back. **Wary**, flushes at some distance, particularly when inland in roadside fields.

Whimbrel: Another amber listed, rare resident on the northern isles (a few winter). Regular during both passage periods however, when they are just as likely seen inland as they are on the coast.

Essentially a **smaller, greyer**, rather than brown version of Curlew with a long **black bill (pink-based** later on in the year) that's **shorter** than Curlew with a **slightly kinked tip**. Beware shorter-billed Curlews, ruled out by this species' **well patterned** head which is **boldly, alternately striped off white** and dull **brown** from below the eyes to the **dark crown**.

In flight, similar in the main to Curlew, particularly the 'dark and light' upperwings. Underwings however are **nowhere white**. Call is best described by the colloquial Shetland name for the species, the **seven whistler**. The short, fast, "**pip-pip-pip-pip-pip-pip**" is both **unmistakable** and **diagnostic**.

Snipe: Another species on the UK (and Ireland) amber list. Scarce breeder locally but winter populations sourced from mid-August onwards immigrants can be significant.

Medium-sized essentially all-brown wader with **short legs**. **Bill long**, straight, **two and a half to three times** the width of the head. Close views reveal a very handsome bird, with bold upperpart patterning of creams, bronze and black, with the paler creams forming **distinct lateral lines** over much of the back. Flanks broadly **barred**. Head pattern stripy with pale, **off-white central crown stripe** (just visible in the cove photo). Juveniles average paler than adults.

If flushed, which can be from some distance away, either single or series of single loud "**keeck**" notes gives their presence away, with the escape flight being fast, **zig-zagged** in nature; invariable goes off a long way **high**. If lucky enough to be witnessed, the song flight is a joy to behold. From on high, birds 'dive' down with their outer tail feathers separated away from the rest of the tail, producing a

remarkable, **throbbing** sound. The whole affair is then repeated over and over though a ‘roller coaster’ affair.

Wings above basically uniform other than for a clear, **white trailing edge**. Underwings are two tone, the inner half being **pale brown**, outers **slightly darker**. Wherever Snipe occur, Jack Snipe can occur too.

Jack Snipe: Winter visitor from late-September through until late-March, early-April. Uncommon but included here as they are widespread, if harder to find.

Small and darker overall than Snipe with a **bill barely longer than the width of the head**. Upperparts less well marked than Snipe but still has two less obvious, **long creamy-brown** lateral stripes. Head markings equally as stripy as Snipe but **dark crown lacks central pale stripe**.

Rarely seen on the ground but they can come into the open, when the **up and down bobbing** of the **entire body** is diagnostic. The scientific name is *Limnocryptes minimus* which is a first class indication of what birders are faced with – a cryptically coloured, small bird. In truth, they are so convinced of their invisibility, they **sit tight**. Oftentimes they only flush out of fear of **being trodden on** and underfoot departures are not uncommon! At such times they are **invariably silent** but sometimes utter a short, low ‘**burp**’ as they go. Escape flight is invariably **low**, before pitching down again, perhaps as little as **20-30 metres away**, rarely more than 50. Walking to the landing point for a second viewing however is usually pointless as they will no longer be there when you arrive.

In flight, and since birds will almost always be flying away, the short bill is difficult to see but it’s actually not essential since its such a dark bird (including the tail) with a much **less obvious white trailing edge**. On the occasion of a mass exodus of both species, caused by some generally scary event, Jacks are easily separated through their smaller size. Having isolated a candidate, bill length is the clincher.

Choosing to look for Jack Snipe will invariably lead to nothing but I’ve found that walking **very slowly** through likely habitat can bring dividends, moreso if you **stop for 15-30 seconds from time to time** as some birds will lose their confidence and depart, especially as you restart walking. Equally, retracing your steps may also bring results.

Woodcock: Scarce, declining amber-listed resident but widespread winter visitor in large numbers – some sources claim up to one million arrive each year. They are nonetheless still a tricky bird to find, much like Jack Snipe but for different reasons.

A **large**, Snipe-like species, though more **pot-bellied**. The typical view is of a bird flying off, when it’s usually **silent** but can give a **low grunt**. Habitat is key, this is a **woodland** specialist, that feeds at night in wet meadows and even in ditches under hedgerows. Not particularly convinced of its own invisibility (though they are practically impossible to find on the ground!) they flush on close approach; closer than 5-10 metres will generally see them on their way.

Long flight views are unlikely outside of displaying males ‘roding’ over their wood or forest territories; wings are uniform orangey-brown both above and below; **broad based. Tail and rump rufous**. The display flight is a dusk event, when males fly direct, just over tree-top height, uttering a repetitive “**gur-gur-gur**”.