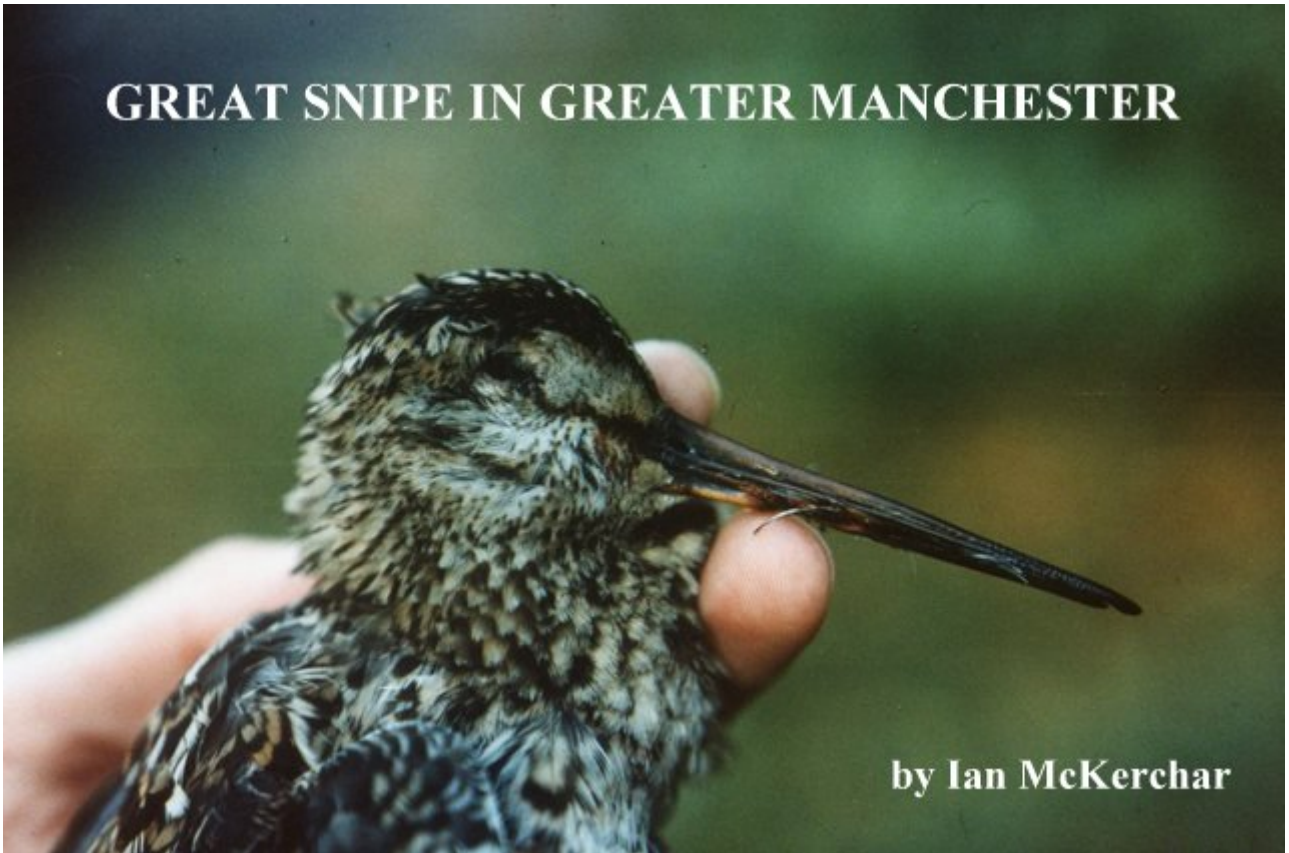


GREAT SNIPE IN GREATER MANCHESTER



by Ian McKerchar

During autumnal east coast UK excursions, wandering though coastal fields in the usual drizzle, I often fantasize of flushing a stocky looking snipe with large white tail corners and prominent white wings bars extending right to the leading edge of the wing. I'd follow after it, obtain confirmatory views, perhaps obtain a few photographs and then sit back and bask in the satisfaction that must be finding one's own Great Snipe. The fantasy has never become reality yet but as and when it does, it really wouldn't seem too out of place would it. I mean, a Great Snipe at an east coast (or Northern Isle) migration hotspot in September/October is a practically annual event these days.

What though, if I was on the wrong side of the Pennines, yes the western side, and it was at the foot of the moors in a little inland county? For that could surely never happen, right? Well it has and more than once apparently!

Greater Manchester has no less than five accepted records of Great Snipe and our bordering counties of Lancashire and Cheshire have accumulated even more. Seemingly, the chances of finding your own Great Snipe right here in Greater Manchester is not the absolute flight of fantasy that one might initially assume. The records of Great Snipe in Greater Manchester are as follows:

1. One flushed from the moors at Birtle, near Bury by M. B. Horan, on the 10th December 1938.
2. One shot at Worsley, on the 20th October 1945, was examined by L. L. Turner.
3. One flushed at Worsley, at the same locality as above, and identified by A. W. Boyd, on the 11th November 1945.
4. One flushed at Worsley by L. L. Turner, on the 15th April, 1946.
5. A juvenile/first winter shot on farmland below the moors at Greenfield, Oldham on the 24th September 1979

In fact, Clifford Oakes in his seminal 1953 tome, *Birds of Lancashire*, commented that the species was an 'occasional visitor from September to March, mainly to the southern half of the county [Lancashire, which then included Greater Manchester], but is probably more frequent and widespread than the records suggest'. Unfortunately of course, the fortunes of this enigmatic species have taken a turn for the worse since Oakes' day and today it is still listed as Near Threatened due to a moderately rapid population decline, owing primarily to habitat loss and degradation, as well as hunting pressure. Needless to say, it would be considered an extreme rarity anywhere in the north-west of England nowadays and any such reoccurrence would be very well attended indeed!

The Great Snipe shot at Greenfield, Oldham, Greater Manchester on 24th September 1979

During 1996, Greater Manchester County Bird Recorder at that time, Judith Smith, undertook a review of national rarities on the Greater Manchester list, suspecting that several records might not have been submitted to the British Birds Rarities Committee or may have even been rejected, which was indeed the case! Amongst these birds was a Great Snipe shot at Greenfield, Oldham in September 1979. The corpse of the bird was apparently sent to the BTO and then forwarded to the British Museum of Natural History, where unfortunately the skin can no longer be found. Fortunately, John Marchant of the BTO took five images of the Great Snipe's corpse on its arrival there and this formed the basis of the record's subsequent submission and acceptance by BBRC.

Until now, the images of the Greenfield Great Snipe have never been publically aired, so all five images taken by John Marchant are included below for the very first time.



Above: An unfortunate end to a magnificent county bird but either way, it highlights once again just what is possible for the optimistic and vigilant observer. (Photo by John Marchant)



Above: (Photo by John Marchant)



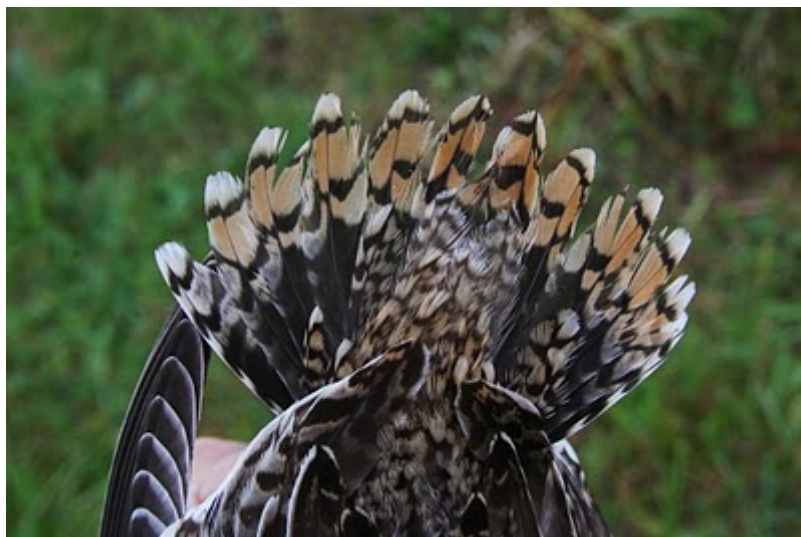
Above: Here the underwing is typically extensively barred and would no doubt appear almost uniformly grey under briefly glimpsed field observations (as the bird belted away from the observer, banking round to ditch back into rough ground further in front perhaps). The underparts too are rather heavily barred other than the belly, which is less well marked and is typical of juveniles. (Photo by John Marchant)



Above: That distinctive characteristic which should set a pulse racing if glimpsed as the bird dashes away from an observer is clearly evident here. Note the large and complete white tips to the wing coverts and in particular the broad white tips to the greater and primary coverts, the latter of which extends prominently right to the leading edge of the wing. (Photo by John Marchant)



Above: Once again, another distinguishing feature likely to catch an observers eye of that Great Snipe flushed from underfoot or as the bird drops back into cover, is admirably portrayed in this image. The outer four pairs of tail feathers have a conspicuous clean and bright white ground colour. Note that the actual outer tail feathers themselves are all white on the inner webs (with only restricted black markings at the very base of the feathers) and the outer webs have only fairly weak black markings along their lengths. This pattern is indicative of juvenile Great Snipe, whereas adults have the outer three pairs of tail feathers almost entirely pure white but for some black markings basally. (Photo by John Marchant)



Above: This juvenile Common Snipe taken at Oxwich Marshes, Swansea on the 18th September 2010 affords a very graphic comparison of tail patterns between the juveniles of Common and Great Snipe. Compare it against the tail of the juvenile Great Snipe above and note especially the amount of apparent white in the outer tail feathers. Evidently, the Common Snipe lacks any prominent amount of pure white in its outer four pairs of tail feathers and on the very outer tail feather itself, other than the rather inconspicuous white outer web, its inner web is clearly sullied with blackish other than the extreme tip. (Photo by Barry Stewart)

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BirdLife International

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank John Marchant for permitting me to utilise the images he took of the Greenfield Great Snipe and similarly to Barry Stewart for kindly allowing me to use his Common Snipe image.

Ian McKerchar, July 2011

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