

Captive Breeding to Save an Endangered Snipe

by Glen Holland, Species Manager
Mt Bruce National Wildlife Centre
Masterton, New Zealand

One of the most significant ornithological discoveries in New Zealand this century occurred on 9 November 1997, when a team searching for Campbell Island Teal on Jacquermart Island, caught a snipe and saw seven others. Jacquermart Island is a 19 ha island off Campbell Island, a subantarctic island south of New Zealand. Up until this time, there was no evidence that a snipe ever occurred in the Campbell Island group.

Rats on Campbell Island had eliminated the now-endangered teal, snipe, and the more common pipit by 1840. All of these species are now confined to rat-free islets scattered around the main island. It is likely that the Campbell Island Snipe will prove to be an endemic subspecies of the New Zealand Snipe *Coenocorypha aucklandica*, which has surviving populations on the Snares, Auckland, and Antipodes Islands.

During the search the dogs' behavior indicated the presence of at least 10

snipes on the island. Given the amount of suitable habitat, there could be up to 60 individuals living on the island, but the total population is likely to be much less than this.

Captive breeding at the New Zealand Department of Conservation's Mt. Bruce National Wildlife Centre has played an important role in saving a number of endangered New Zealand bird species. One of the options being considered to assist in assuring the future recovery of the newly discovered Campbell Island Snipe is captive breeding to provide sufficient birds for reintroduction to Campbell Island following the proposed eradication of rats there. The plan would be to run breeding programmes on analogue (surrogate), more numerous snipe species in order to gain expertise in the husbandry of *Coenocorypha* snipes. These would be the Chatham Island Snipe *Coenocorypha pusilla* followed by the Auckland Island Snipe. The proven avicultural techniques would then be applied to the Campbell Island Snipe. Initially we plan to bring three known pairs and 12 wild laid eggs of the Chatham Island Snipe, into captivity. The eggs will allow us to gain experience on artificial incubation of snipe eggs and hand-rearing snipe chicks to independence. Once adult birds begin to lay, the first clutches will be lifted for artificial incubation and the second clutch left with

the adults.

One previous attempt was made to hold Chatham Island Snipe in captivity in 1988, but all eight adult birds caught were lost due to stress and aspergillosis. However a number of factors have changed in the last 10 years that should increase the likelihood of successfully maintaining and breeding snipes in captivity. They include:

- improved methods of transport for birds and eggs
- better disease management
- commercial supplies of insects now available
- detailed research reports on snipe feeding and breeding ecology
- experienced avicultural staff at Mt. Bruce.

Some of the avicultural questions which need to be answered are :

- Methods of settling the birds into captivity and on to captive diets.
- Captive diets and methods of presentation.
- Aviary size and landscape.
- Breeding behavior, nutritional requirements etc.
- Artificial incubation and hand rearing
- Disease management

I would like to request international assistance from anybody with any experience with the captive husbandry of snipes (i.e. *Gallinago* species) or even species such as godwits and whimbrels, some of the latter of which could provide avicultural information applicable to snipes. Alternatively, should anybody have knowledge of an aviculturist or institution with such knowledge, or of any possible reference material on the subject, their contact details would be invaluable. Any information, advice or contact details would be greatly appreciated and should be sent me at the address given below. I will also undertake to keep aviculturists internationally, informed of the progress of this project.

Glen Holland

Species Manager

Mt. Bruce National Wildlife Centre

RD 1, Masterton

New Zealand

Ph: 06 - 3758004

Fax: 06 - 375 8003

Email: wildlife@winz.co.nz 



Captive breeding is one option being considered for the recently discovered Campbell Island Snipe. Its population is probably fewer than 60 birds.