

# Waka Waka: The Giant Snipe

## *Gallinago undulata* in Paraguay

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Giant Snipe *Gallinago undulata gigantea*, Kanguery, Itapúa, Paraguay, September 2013 (Don Bland / [www.fauparaguay.com](http://www.fauparaguay.com)).

**S**hakira may have announced the arrival of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa with a song called “Waka Waka”, but the title lyrics evolved millennia earlier in the wet grasslands of South America, composed by the elusive, nocturnal and rarely observed Giant Snipe *Gallinago undulata*. As dusk sets in and the diurnal birds are settling down to roost, a mysterious and slightly nasal “waka-waka-waka-waka ....” can be heard emanating from the ground in dense grasslands in eastern Paraguay (well captured in Juan Mazar Barnett’s 1997 recording,

on xeno-canto: <http://www.xeno-canto.org/15415>). It is time for the Giant Snipe to emerge.

Weighing in at almost half a kilogram, the Giant Snipe is, predictably perhaps, the largest of the snipe (Hayman *et al.* 1986). The species occurs as two disjunct subspecies, the nominate *undulata* in northern South America, and the much larger *gigantea* in eastern Bolivia, south-east Brazil, eastern Paraguay and north-east Argentina (van Gils & Wiersma 1996). While both subspecies occur over large geographic ranges, they are found at low densities and are patchily distributed. An

apparent small population (perhaps less than 25,000 birds in total) and loss of habitat has led to the species being considered of 'High Concern' (the second highest threat category) in a recent status assessment (Lesterhuis and Clay 2011).

In Paraguay the species is fairly widespread east of the Paraguay River, but restricted to areas of natural grasslands, primarily within the Atlantic Forest ecoregion, although usually in 'islands' of Cerrado and Mesopotamian Grassland habitats. Given the threats to such grassland areas—overgrazing, frequent fires, conversion to pastures and crops—it is considered Near Threatened at the national level (Guyra Paraguay 2005). Fortunately, important populations are protected at Reserva Kanguery in San Rafael and Aguara Ñu in the Mbaracayú Forest Nature Reserve.

Seeing the Giant Snipe is a challenge, but there are a few tips to help the intrepid birder. Familiarity with the call is essential, but merely recognising the call is not enough on its own. Though far-carrying, the voice possesses a strange, distant quality that makes it difficult to pinpoint its source. The bird may be alternatively closer or further away than it seems, but the fact that the birds are pretty faithful to roosting areas means that a bit of local knowledge can go a long way. You will also need to get your timing just right. Giant Snipe give their "waka-waka" call from the ground for a short time at dusk, but do not emerge until after dark, at which point they often perform high altitude, woodcock-like roding displays, accompanied by a bizarre noise like an overflying jet and a weird "wa-wa-wow" sound, both of which are probably mechanical in origin (exemplified by xeno-canto cut 83363: <http://www.xeno-canto.org/83363>). To be in with a chance of seeing the bird the observer will need to have a good general idea of where it is when on the ground, good knowledge of the song and a decent flashlight to allow a good look.

Should you be successful you will not be disappointed—and if you are lucky enough to have one perch nearby, the bird may allow an extraordinarily close approach, even when illuminated by spotlight. Giant Snipe is a remarkable bird, with an extraordinary 12 cm long bill and wonderfully cryptic plumage that seems to give the bird a certain well-placed confidence that it can see you better than you can see it. Birds on the ground walk with an unsteady kiwi-like waddle, the elongated bill being held gingerly out in front and the oversized feet requiring considerable concentration to manipulate. The legs

are set way back on the body, giving it a top-heavy and almost tailless appearance, and consequently movements are slow and deliberate. Although it may appear that this is a morphological necessity enforced on the bird by its oversized appendages, it is in fact a cunning part of the bird's camouflage, culminating in a disappearing act when the bird crouches ever so slowly into a clump of grass and appears to vanish before your eyes.

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