

 **Dubelt** *Life +*



# *Conservation of Great Snipe in the Upper Narew Valley*

*Active protection of Great Snipe Gallinago media  
in the Upper Narew River Valley Natura 2000 site*



The project is funded by the European Union  
within the framework of the LIFE+ Programme.



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# Meet THE GREAT SNIPE

- Great Snipe is a middle-sized migratory bird related to Common Snipe, Jack Snipe and Woodcock.
- The Polish population of Great Snipe is estimated at about 350–450 males, making it one of the rarest wader birds breeding in Poland.
- The most important breeding areas of Great Snipe are located in the Podlasie region – particularly in the valleys of Biebrza and Narew – as well as in the Lubelszczyzna region.
- Great Snipe holds the world record in the distance of uninterrupted migration to wintering quarters: it can fly without any stops from the breeding area down to equatorial Africa, over 4000 km.
- Only females incubate eggs and care for the nestlings.
- The Great Snipe's diet consists mainly of invertebrates, particularly earthworms.



*Common Snipe*



*Jack Snipe*



*Eurasian Woodcock*

*The distribution  
of the Great  
Snipe in Poland...*



*... and in Europe*



# Unusual breeding behaviour

- In the spring time, when the breeding season starts, male Great Snipes gather at dusk in small lek mating arenas, where they display their advantages in front of the females.
- Since the most persistent males can display tirelessly the entire night (loosing in the process up to 6% of their body mass!), they require rich feeding grounds located near the leks.
- Great Snipes have strong fidelity to their leks and, if favourable conditions are maintained, they may keep returning to the same site for several decades.
- Some females visit a few leks during one night, while others keep coming back to the same lek arena.



# Natura 2000 site 'The upper Narew River Valley'

- The Special Protection Area for birds, "The Upper Narew River Valley", encompasses an area of 18 384 ha and stretches a distance of nearly 60 km – from Siemianówka reservoir up to Suraz.
- This section of the Narew River has a natural character with meanders and oxbow lakes, and the only drained fragment of the valley is Filipy Swamp (Bagno Filipy) located in the western part of the area. However, after building the Siemianówka reservoir, the quality of water and habitats deteriorated.
- At least 34 bird species listed in Annex I of the Bird Directive are present there, including amongst others Montagu' Harrier, Corncrake, Little Crake and Aquatic Warbler.
- Undoubtedly one of the most precious species is Great Snipe – in 2014, there were ca. 60 males within the project site, making it the second most important area for Great Snipe in Poland, after Biebrza Marshes (Ostoja Biebrzańska).
- A vast majority of Great Snipe breeding sites in Poland is protected within the framework of the Natura 2000 network, which makes it easier to plan and carry out actions towards the active conservation of this species.



**The project „Active protection of Great Snipe Gallinago media in the Upper Narew River Valley Natura 2000 site” is conducted by the Polish Society for Bird Protection (PTOP) together with Natura International Polska, within the framework of LIFE+ programme.**



**PTOP** has been protecting habitats for birds, especially wader species, since 1985. PTOp purchases land – mainly wet meadows, wetlands and wastelands – and set up communal reserves in order to restore biotopes to favourable conditions for birds. We actively protect birds’ habitats avoiding conflicts with the local communities. At the same time, we cooperate with farmers, promoting breeding of the Konik horse and Polish Red cattle. We also own an organic farm in Żywkowo in Warmia region – an area which supports one of the largest colonies of White Stork in Poland. PTOp bases its actions on long-time experience, scientific research and opinions of independent experts. At the same time, we make every effort to raise ecological awareness of the public through our publications and organisation of field trips, conferences and workshops.



**Natura International** Polska works to conserve, protect and promote the richness and integrity of natural ecosystems to ensure the economic, cultural and social prosperity of communities. We do this by taking an integrated landscape scale approach, developing good practice and demonstrating effects through sound evidence.

Humans have for millennia shaped the natural heritage in Europe and in the face of progressing the socio-economic changes, there is a need for actions promoting and adequately financing traditional agriculture, local values and products. This is the reason why we are interested not only in wildlife conservation, but also in the socio-economic status of people, who directly shape European landscapes and nature.

More information about the project can be found on our website: [www.dubelt.ptop.org.pl](http://www.dubelt.ptop.org.pl)

# Threats to GREAT SNIPES



- Abandonment of the traditional use of meadows and pastures is one of the greatest threats to Great Snipe. Great Snipes prefer to forage on sites with low vegetation. However, the decline in mowing and grazing from farmers results in excessive overgrowth of open habitats and the accumulation of dead biomass, which in turn hinders access to food resources.
- Intensification of farming – early mowing of large areas hinders successful breeding of Great Snipes. In addition, the eutrophication of habitats driven by the artificial fertilization of fields, leads to faster vegetation growth, which in turn inhibits effective foraging.
- Low water levels – artificial drainage of wetlands and river valleys is responsible for the deterioration of habitat; too dry and compact ground prevents the snipes from probing the soil in the search for their food and affects the vegetation structure, forcing them to abandon their habitats.
- Hunting – although Great Snipes used to be hunted, it is now a strictly protected species. However, in spite of its current status, it is still threatened by poachers, who shoot them during migration, at wintering grounds or even at breeding sites in Eastern Europe.
- Human disturbance – the unusual lekking behaviour and the status of a „rarity” attracts many birdwatchers; their continuous presence close to the mating site, combined with unskilful observation and photography techniques, may disturb their natural behaviour and even lead to the abandonment of the lek.
- Predation – although predation is a natural process, the original balance between predators and their prey has been distorted by humans, who are responsible for the growth of Red Fox populations (through aerial distribution of rabies vaccine) and the introduction of non-native American Mink – the two predators representing a serious threat to wader birds.





# What do GREAT SNIPES need?



- Grazing – horses and cattle graze the vegetation and loosen the soil facilitating the creation of microhabitats, where Great Snipes prefer to feed.
- Mowing – Great Snipes forage in places with low vegetation, which they need to access during the whole breeding season; it is therefore important to cut and remove the biomass from the managed areas.
- High groundwater level – soft and humid soil is essential for Great Snipe's foraging techniques (probing the soil with long beak). Thanks to the hydrological constructions of Beavers, Great Snipes are able to find favourable foraging spots, even in areas drained by humans.
- Habitat mosaic – diverse vegetation structure and the proximity of mowed patches at different times during the season, provide safety refuges for incubating females and suitable feeding sites during the whole breeding season.



# How do we protect GREAT SNIPES

- We are purchasing land in the Upper Narew Valley – 160 ha of land will be purchased as part of the project and managed exclusively for the purpose of Great Snipe protection.
- We are restoring habitats – we are mowing abandoned grasslands and removing the scrub from a total of 230 ha of land.
- We are constructing fords and access roads to meadows – this new infrastructure will allow us to mow and the removal of hay.
- We are constructing weirs on drainage ditches – in this way we are locally improving the groundwater conditions of over-drained habitats.
- We are studying behaviour and habitat preferences of Great Snipe – deeper understanding of this species' ecology will allow us to better plan the conservation measures.
- We are developing the National Action Plan for Great Snipe – a strategic document, which will help to protect the species on all breeding sites in Poland.
- We are disseminating knowledge about Great Snipe and its habitats in the Upper Narew River Valley Natura 2000 site.