

History of the KCTWS Snipe Award

By Mark Sexson

The first Snipe Award was presented to Steve Capel in 1987, but what was the history and intent behind this quarter century-old traveling icon? The board of KCTWS recognized that certain individual members often put forth efforts that warranted special recognition. A certificate was proposed and developed, but the Board also felt that the Chapter needed something that could be passed on and was a type of recorded history. Although difficult to admit, I must give some of the credit to the Kansas Fisheries Society. Their **Bullfrog Award** spurred the idea for a light-hearted traveling trophy geared toward KCTWS. The **Snipe Award** was designed to spur conversations about the organization and the people who received it. Unlike the Bullfrog, the Snipe has survived trips from one end of the state to the other for over two decades.

At the time the award was created, the proverbial “snipe hunt” was still alive and well. For those too young to remember this rite of passage to adulthood, the art of live snipe hunting involved a group of teenagers, some older and wiser, and obviously at least one much younger and less enlightened hunter. More than one bag holder was preferred, if more uninitiated volunteers could be found. The bag holders would be spread out across the countryside, charged with the very important job of holding the burlap bag open while shining a flashlight into the bag so the snipe would know where to run. This individual was positioned in a field or pasture and the others left to beat the bushes to flush the snipe and encourage it to run for cover. The snipe would see the light and the security of the bag and run into it. The younger hunter was schooled in how to close the bag quickly in case the snipe changed its mind. Of course, it was essential that the snipe hunt was conducted in the dark of night as that was the only time snipe were active. It could take hours to catch one of these elusive night snipe. In some cases, the sun would be coming up before the hunt could be considered a failure.

The builder of the Snipe Award (that would be me) took some creative license by adding another well-known and accepted practice of catching live birds; namely the very skilled technique of hiding where you knew a bird would land so you could quietly reach out with a saltshaker and sprinkle salt on the bird’s tail. If you were successful in salting the tail, the bird would be unable to fly and thus would be yours for the taking. Rumor has it that as an additional measure to ensure success, some “bag and flashlight holding” snipe hunters were also issued saltshakers to prevent the snipe from flying away before the bag was secured.

It is important to be able to laugh at ourselves and acknowledge that life should not be so serious as to prevent us from stopping and watching the clouds now and then.

The Snipe Award allows us to do that, while still honoring someone who has done something special for the profession we all hold dear in our hearts. Most of us got into this field because something deep inside us said it was the right thing to do. It was not to make a lot of money or become famous. It was to do our small part to protect and enhance the natural resources that we loved.

I have been honored over the years to see this esteemed trophy move from awardee to awardee. I have seen it proudly displayed in offices of universities, zoos, private homes, regional and field offices. It has not been hidden in the corner or in a box but has been front and center for all to see. I knew when I installed the glass some 25 years ago that before long, I would hear the award met with an untimely death. Perhaps taking a tumble from an open tailgate somewhere on a back road, out there where wildlife still goes about its business, despite what we humans are up to. But this has not happened and recipients have treated it with care and respect. Not because of the box and bird, or the story behind it, but because of the names inscribed on the small plaques at its base.

The story of the snipe hunter is also a message for those of us working in the wildlife field, and for those just getting started. The mission of The Wildlife Society has always been to search for knowledge and to use this knowledge to assure wildlife habitats and the wildlife that require them will survive into an uncertain future. The Snipe story reinforces the fact that there is misinformation out there that we as professionals have an obligation to set straight through information and education. Laugh, smile, and attempt to not take yourself too seriously, while remembering that we, the members of the Kansas Chapter of The Wildlife Society, are one of the best hopes for the wildlife of tomorrow. Happy Snipe Hunting!