

The Other Migratory Game Birds

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THOUSANDS of Pennsylvanians hunt ducks, geese, mourning doves and woodcock. However, these high-profile species are not the only migratory birds offering hunting opportunities. Here are the basics on some others that receive only minor attention, but offer major recreation for those looking to add a new angle to their hunting experience.

CROWS

About 25,000 Pennsylvania hunters harvest around 200,000 crows annually. Pennsylvania's crow season runs from July to April, but only on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. This unique season structure maximizes opportunity within federal regulations, which allow for 124 days of crow hunting outside the nesting season. There is no bag limit. Crow hunters must have a PA hunting license, but no additional licenses or stamps.

For dedicated bird hunters, crow hunting is a chance to keep reflexes honed during the off season, providing opportunities for both decoying and pass shooting. For novices, crow hunting offers a great hunting experience with lots of action. It can be a great way to introduce youngsters to wingshooting.

If hunting in familiar territory, locate a flyway that crows use to travel from a night roost to daytime feeding areas. Set up with a blind and decoys a few hundred yards off the main flight path to lure small groups of birds into your set during their morning commute from the roost. For evening hunts, locate local staging areas where birds often linger as they drift from feeding areas back to the night roost. If hunting in unfamiliar territory, you can locate crows on a feeding area, ask permission from the landowner, then set up a quick blind and begin calling using a fight or distress sequence of calls. Crow hunting techniques can be quite complex and addictive, and a brief Web search can reveal additional tips and strategies.

"WEBLESS" WETLAND SPECIES

Snipe, rails, coots and moorhens share the marshy habitats of waterfowl, but lack webbing between their toes. Their assorted *whinneys*, *clacks*, *clucks*, and *squawks* add life to a wetland even though they're seldom observed. Surveys indicate that relatively few hunters pursue these species here, harvesting just a few hundred coots and snipe — and even more negligible numbers of the others. Hunting seasons, chosen to correspond with migration timing from frameworks set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, occur through autumn. Consult the "Pennsylvania Guide to Migratory Bird Hunting" brochure posted on the PGC website for specifics. To hunt these species, hunters must possess both a regular hunting license and a migratory game bird license; however, a federal duck stamp is not required. Within this category of birds, hunters are most likely to encounter common snipe and American coots. More information on these secretive marsh birds is available on the PGC website by clicking under "Wildlife" and then "Wildlife Notes."

SNIPE

Snipe may be confused with the more popular woodcock, for the birds are somewhat similar in appearance and habitats: wet shrubby meadows, swampy pastures, and areas of shallow water with low, sparse vegetation. Snipe are often found in more open habitats than woodcock, although moist soils are key to finding either bird.

Snipe have been described as "good eating and tough shooting." They fly quickly and erratically, zigzagging away with a harsh *scaipe* call. Snipe normally flush into the wind, so it's best to hunt with the wind at your back. Though they can be widespread throughout our state in autumn as singles or small groups, they are most likely to be found in the marshes and swamps in the northwest.

COOTS

The coot is a common migrant and winter resident. It's a dark, chicken-like bird with a bone-white bill and frontal plate. Coots are often associated with deeper water wetlands, where they dive and dabble like

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ducks or rest in groups on the open water. In fall and winter, coots may be found in large rafts, numbering hundreds of birds, on open lakes and ponds in nearly any part of the commonwealth. Coots can be hunted incidentally as they swim into a duck decoy set up, or hunters can target them specifically by working them into a "pinch," where a hunter sets up at one end of a small body of water while another hunter drives the coots toward his waiting partner. Solo hunters can work coots down a narrow bay or inlet, then pass shoot as the birds fly toward the open water. Coots may be best hunted in the afternoon, so as not to interfere with early-morning duck hunting on shared water bodies. Most duck recipes will work for coots. □