

A photograph of four black-necked stilts wading in a shallow pond. The birds have long, thin pink legs, black heads and necks, and white bodies with dark brown wings and backs. They are standing in shallow, rippling water. The title 'Pond Life' is overlaid in the upper center, and the author's name 'by Mark Yokoyama' is in the bottom left corner.

Pond Life

by Mark Yokoyama

Voyage of the Whimbrel



As fall approaches, thousands of shorebirds arrive on St. Martin from North America. Some will stop to rest and eat before traveling on to South America, and others will spend the winter here. The Whimbrel is one of the largest and most beautiful of these long distance travelers.

The Whimbrel breeds in the Arctic during the summer, but the rest of the year is spent in warmer areas like the Caribbean. In some cases, they fly non-stop for over 2,500 miles to reach their wintering grounds, so they typically arrive hungry. Luckily, St. Martin has many salt ponds with mud flats full of fiddler crabs and the Whimbrel has a long, curved bill that is perfect for grabbing fiddler crabs from their burrows.

Recently, scientists have been able to attach satellite transmitter “backpacks” to Whimbrels to track their migration. One thing they learned is that each bird will typically return to the same exact places each year, so the Whimbrels on our island are probably the same ones each winter. This information helps us understand how to protect breeding and overwintering sites that Whimbrels depend on.

One of the birds in the study—named Machi by the scientists studying her—had been tracked for 27,000 miles before a tropical storm forced her to stop in the Caribbean on her way to South America. Unfortunately, when she arrived on Guadeloupe, she was shot by hunters. This was a huge disappointment, but her death brought attention to the potential risks of overhunting, and new laws were passed on both Guadeloupe and Martinique to limit shorebird hunting.



If you would like to see a Whimbrel, they are typically on the island from late summer until early spring. The best places to spot them are the mudflats at the edges of our salt ponds. They are often at Salines d'Orient near Le Galion, and you might be able to see one from the birdwatching boardwalk along Étang de la Barrière near the Pinel ferry dock in Cul-de-Sac.

When writing about St. Martin wildlife in 1938, S.J. Kruythoff wrote, "The best time for hunting these curved-billed birds is at sunrise at the water's edge." Early morning and evening are the best times to see Whimbrels today as well, but if you are planning on shooting one, please make sure you use a camera!



All Dressed Up, but Not for Long

Bird feathers get worn and damaged, so they need to be replaced periodically. Almost all birds will change their feathers at least once a year, a process known as molting. Many birds will molt twice each year, once before the breeding season and once after. Often—especially for male birds—the breeding plumage is more distinctive. They dress to impress.

Birds that spend the winter on St. Martin are usually wearing their basic, or non-breeding plumage. This plumage is often brown or gray, with fewer markings, and serves as camouflage. It can even be a little bit confusing: when they're here, the Spotted Sandpiper isn't usually spotted and the Black-bellied Plover doesn't usually have a black belly.



During the late summer and early fall, you still have a chance to see many birds arriving in their breeding plumage—or at least some of it—before they molt into their basic plumage.

The Black-bellied Plover is particularly impressive in its breeding plumage. It is the largest plover on the island, and the male has a black belly with a white stripe down each side of its neck. They are most common on the edges of our salt ponds, but may be found along the beach as well. They tend to be wary and are quick to fly off when approached, so a quiet approach and a pair of binoculars can help you get a better look. But do it early in the season: these birds may begin molting before their migration and will finish soon after arriving. After that, you might as well use their European name: the Grey Plover.



Common Gallinule: Thriving on St. Martin



The Common Gallinule, with its distinctive red and yellow bill, is a common site on the ponds of St. Martin today, but it wasn't always so. During the 20th century, records indicated that it was rare here, or possibly absent from the island altogether. Understanding why it was rare in the past and common today could help us understand how to coexist with other bird species.

In his 1938 book, *The Netherlands Windward Islands*, S.J. Kruythoff provided what is probably the first account of this species on the island. He described it as "a winter visitant" that was "found on very remote ponds and swamps." He added that it was "a shy bird." This may seem to be a surprising assessment, as today the gallinule is found on almost any body of water on the island, even roadside drainage ditches surrounded by buildings and busy traffic.



The Dutch ornithologist Karel Voous visited the Dutch Windward Islands from 1951 to 1952 and published a survey of the birds he encountered in 1965. In his survey, he did not include the gallinule at all, and felt that the information recorded by Kruythoff was "insufficient." In fact, Voous found Kruythoff's data on a number of bird species to be lacking, but in each case, the presence of the birds was subsequently confirmed by later researchers.





In the early 1970s, Andries Hoogerwerf, assisted by his son Henk Hoogerwerf and son-in-law Anne de Haan, found gallinules each time he visited the island to conduct bird surveys, and even documented a nest with eggs. Although the number of sightings was small, with only one or two birds seen during most visits, it seems they were breeding on the island and present throughout the year.

Today these birds can be seen on almost any body of water, and they breed throughout the year. Adult pairs can even be seen foraging with newborn chicks and their last generation of offspring—full-size, but with juvenile plumage—at the same time. What has changed over the last few decades and allowed them to thrive?



Were they hunted in the past?
This could explain why they
were rare and shy, even at a
time when the island had more
wetlands, and why some other
wetland birds have also become
more common on St. Martin
over the last few decades.

Blue-billed Bully

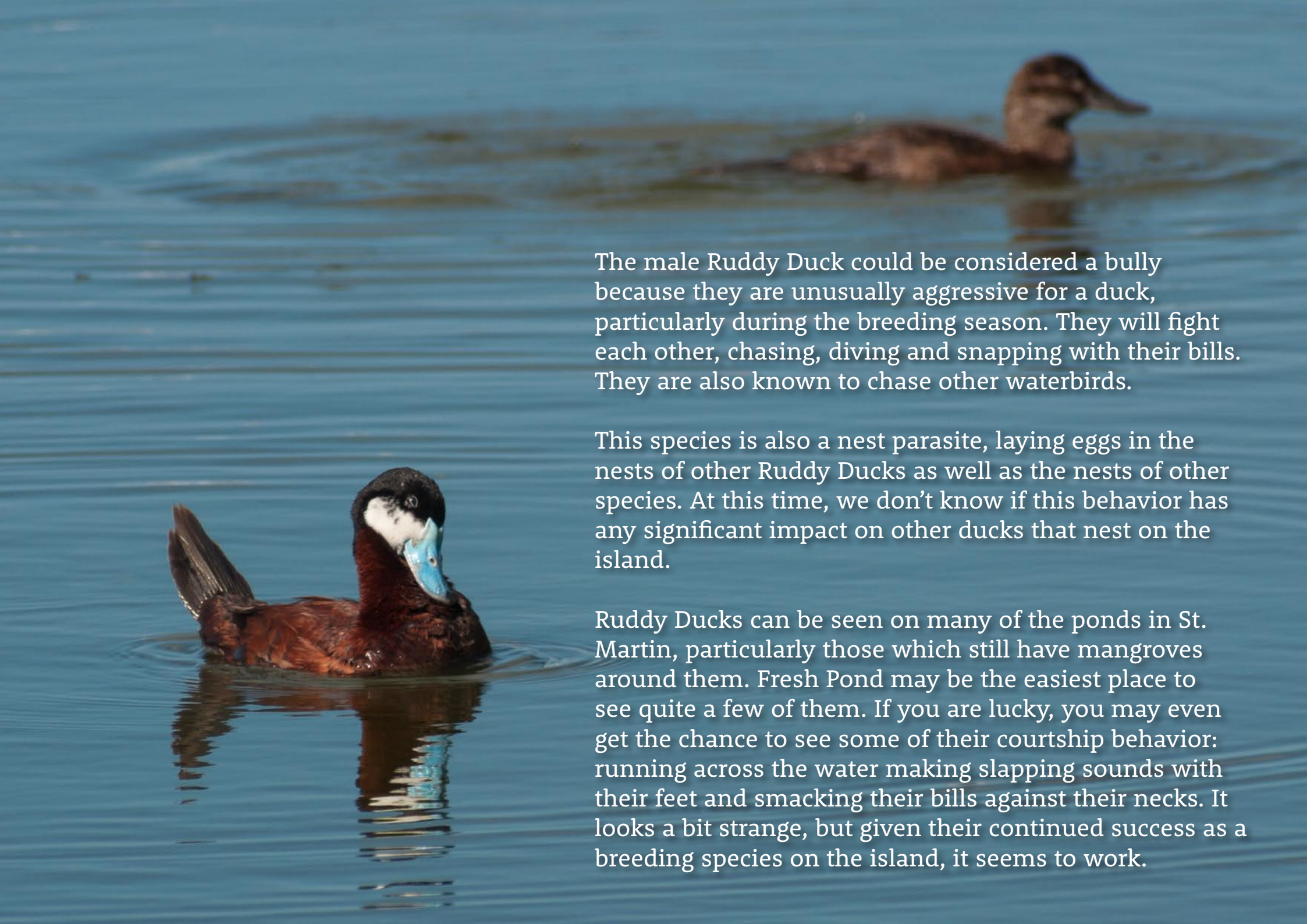
The male Ruddy Duck in breeding plumage is unmistakable. It has a big, fat bill that is bright blue. In non-breeding plumage, it looks much more like the female of the species, with a gray bill. Of course, they don't grow a new bill every year. The outer surface of the bill is covered in a layer of keratin, the same material our hair and nails are made of, which grows continuously and provides the blue color.



The Ruddy Duck is one of the few ducks that breeds on St. Martin, and can be seen throughout the year. Surprisingly, it was first documented on the island in 2001 by Adam Brown and Natalia Collier from Environmental Protection in the Caribbean (EPIC), who found approximately 250 of these ducks at Fresh Pond. In 2002, they documented the presence of ducklings for the first time. Previous bird surveys of the island included no sightings of this species.

This duck feeds primarily on aquatic invertebrates, typically diving down to capture them. They will take a mouthful of mud from the bottom and strain out insects and other small animals. Because they are more active at night, they are often seen resting or sleeping during the day with their bills tucked under a wing. They will also roost in mangroves at the water's edge.





The male Ruddy Duck could be considered a bully because they are unusually aggressive for a duck, particularly during the breeding season. They will fight each other, chasing, diving and snapping with their bills. They are also known to chase other waterbirds.

This species is also a nest parasite, laying eggs in the nests of other Ruddy Ducks as well as the nests of other species. At this time, we don't know if this behavior has any significant impact on other ducks that nest on the island.

Ruddy Ducks can be seen on many of the ponds in St. Martin, particularly those which still have mangroves around them. Fresh Pond may be the easiest place to see quite a few of them. If you are lucky, you may even get the chance to see some of their courtship behavior: running across the water making slapping sounds with their feet and smacking their bills against their necks. It looks a bit strange, but given their continued success as a breeding species on the island, it seems to work.

A Clever Opportunist

The Green Heron is quite common on St. Martin, although it could often pass unnoticed as it waits in solemn stillness at the water's edge. It is a versatile predator, feeding on fish, frogs, lizards, insects, crabs and many other small animals. It is perhaps one of the smartest birds on the island, and one of the most adaptable, finding ways to survive, and thrive, on the island despite rapid human development of many of its former habitats.

It is a small heron, and not very green, although in the right light the feathers of its back can reflect a greenish hue. Adults have a dark crown above their orange eyes, a dark gray, back and a rich, brown neck. Juveniles tend to be a lighter brown with spotted wings and more prominent white streaks down their neck. They typically appear to be rather short and stout for a heron, but can extend their neck a surprising amount when they feel like stretching, or striking at their prey.



The Green Heron is one of the few birds that is a documented tool-user. In their case, they are known to drop insects or other small items onto the surface of the water in order to attract fish, which they then capture and eat. They are able to exploit a variety of food sources, and are often found far from the salt ponds that serve as the primary habitat for most herons and egrets. They also hunt both by day and night, particularly favoring the hours around dawn and dusk when the dim light gives them a slight advantage against their prey.

While any birds that are thriving on St. Martin today have made their peace in one way or another with the rising human population, the Green Heron is especially successful at exploiting human-impacted environments for personal gain. They are common along roadside ditches and even concrete drainage systems. They consume the several frog species that were introduced to the island inadvertently by humans, and they will gladly pluck guppies or goldfish from backyard ponds. With their smarts and adaptability, they are one bird that will probably always survive on St. Martin.






To see a Green Heron, simply visit practically any body of water and look closely for them near the water's edge. They may be nestled amongst the vegetation or leaning out over the shallows waiting for a small fish to swim too close. If you're very lucky, you may even see their unique style of fishing with bait!

The Yellow-crowned Night Heron

One of our most distinctive herons, the Yellow-crowned Night Heron is a nocturnal predator that feeds primarily on crabs and other crustaceans. In fact, in this region it is often known as the crab-eater. It is a breeding resident on St. Martin and can be seen here year-round, although during the day it often prefers shady hiding spots where it can rest.

The look of the Yellow-crowned Night Heron is distinctive. It has a grey body and black head, with a white or yellow stripe down the top of its head. Its body and bill are thicker than those of most herons, and even the brown and white juveniles can be identified by their shape. The eyes of the adult are bright red, while those of the juvenile are orange. A closely-related species, the black-crowned night heron, may also be seen on the island, but it is less common. It has a black back and no stripe down the top of its head.





These night herons typically forage alone, most often on the salt ponds and their mud flats where crabs and other prey are plentiful. Less often, they may be seen on beaches, rocky coastlines or even in urban areas, during the quiet hours of the night. Although their primary diet is crabs, like other herons they will eat a variety of animals if they have the opportunity, including lizards, worms, mice and young birds.



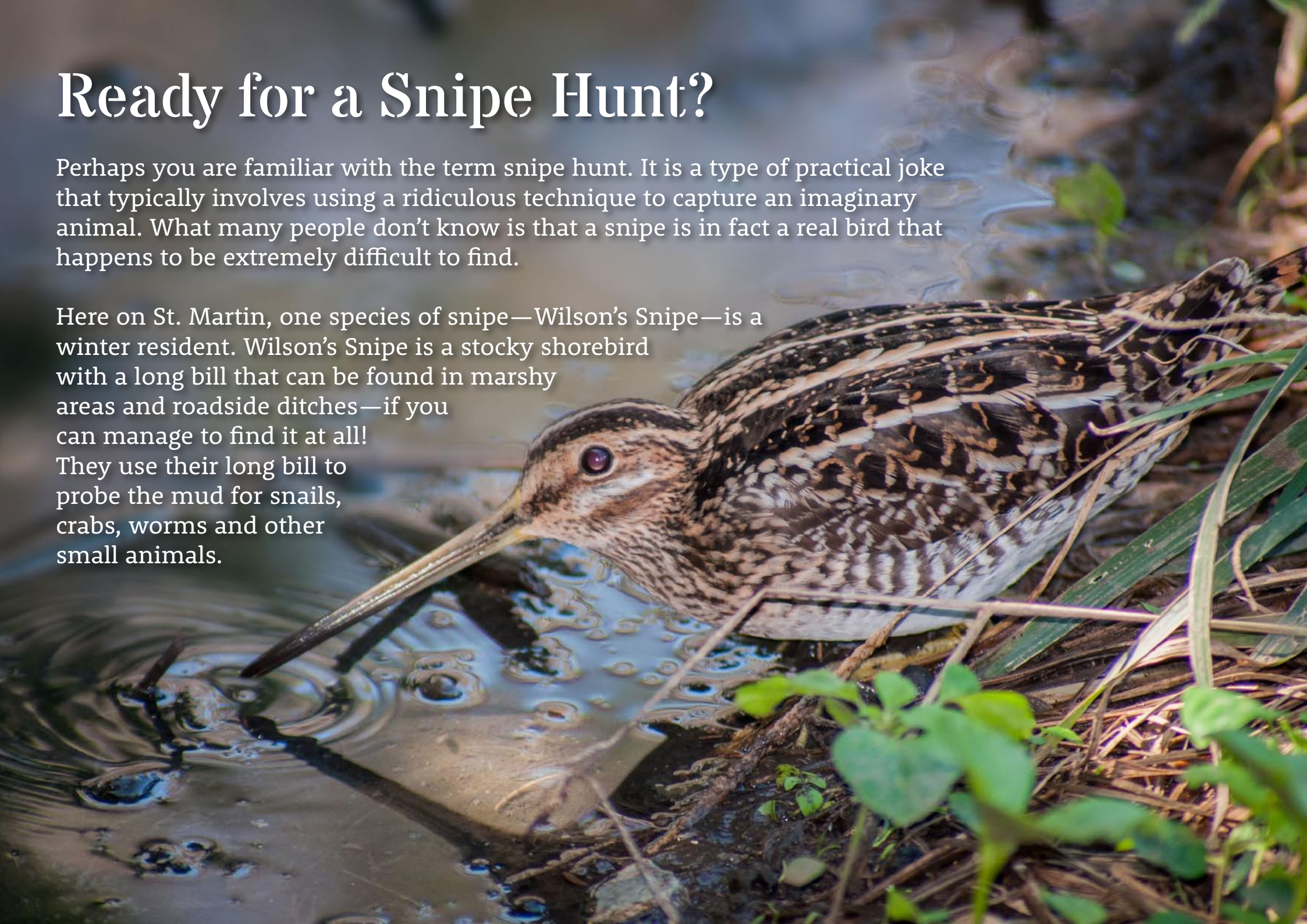
Night herons nest in colonies, and on Pinel Island and Little Key there are a number of nests hidden in the trees. Their nests are made primarily of twigs and may be as large as four feet across. The same nest is used year after year, growing larger over time as nesting material is added. The night heron will lay several light blue eggs once a year, and it typically takes about two months from the time eggs are laid to when the young herons leave the nest. The night heron takes two years to reach adulthood, and in the second year, their coloration is in between the juvenile and adult plumage. Their body is a light gray-brown, and while they develop a black head and white cheek stripe, the stripe on the top of their head is brown rather than yellow.

The night heron is not endangered, but in the past it was considered a delicacy (known as gros bec, meaning thick-bill). Hunting of these birds for food, including young birds taken from the nest, may have reduced their population in the past, but is not common today. Like other herons and egrets they were also hunted for their feathers in the past. Today, if you would like to see a Yellow-crowned Night Heron your best bet is to search carefully along the shore of a salt pond or keep your eyes open at night, looking for this bird hiding silently in the shadows.

Ready for a Snipe Hunt?

Perhaps you are familiar with the term snipe hunt. It is a type of practical joke that typically involves using a ridiculous technique to capture an imaginary animal. What many people don't know is that a snipe is in fact a real bird that happens to be extremely difficult to find.

Here on St. Martin, one species of snipe—Wilson's Snipe—is a winter resident. Wilson's Snipe is a stocky shorebird with a long bill that can be found in marshy areas and roadside ditches—if you can manage to find it at all! They use their long bill to probe the mud for snails, crabs, worms and other small animals.



The snipe is difficult to find because it tends to stay well concealed in vegetation. Most of the time, it goes unnoticed until it flushes, or flies away. It is quite easy to be only a few meters from a snipe, looking carefully for it, without seeing it at all. Although it is incredibly hard to spot, the snipe is a handsome bird, primarily brown with bold stripes on its head and back.

Like other migratory shorebirds, it makes a remarkable journey each year from its summer breeding grounds in Alaska and Canada to its wintering grounds in the southern US, Caribbean and South America.

In addition to their stellar camouflage, snipes have other unusual talents. The tip of their bill is flexible, which allows them to open just the tip of their bill while feeding, without opening the rest of the bill. Presumably this comes in handy, allowing them to grab a food item from the mud without getting a mouthful of mud. Male snipes also make a unique whistling sound called “winnowing.” This sound is made not with their mouth, but by using specially curved tail feathers that produce a whistle with each wingbeat during flight.





If you would like to see a snipe, your best bet is to search carefully by roadside ditches and marshy areas where grasses or other vegetation provide cover at the water's edge. If you do come upon a snipe, chances are you may not notice it until it flies away. If that happens, don't despair! Snipes often have a favorite spot where they spend most of their time, so you can always come back another day to try to spot it again.

Of course, it takes patience to develop the skill to spot a snipe, so don't expect to be an expert right away. In fact, snipe are so difficult to hunt, a special term was given to hunters that were able to shoot them. Eventually, this term would be applied to other expert sharpshooters. The word? Sniper!

This book was created for the 2016 Migratory Bird Festival. The chapters were adapted from Bird Watch SXM articles originally published in the Weekender section of *The Daily Herald*.

The annual Migratory Bird Festival is a free, public event where residents and visitors alike can see, celebrate, and learn about the marvelous migratory birds that travel thousands of miles each year to visit or spend the winter in St. Martin. These amazing birds connect the Americas with their incredible journeys, and St. Martin plays an important role in their life cycle.

Activities at the 2016 Migratory Bird Festival include birdwatching, multimedia presentations, art activities and more! This year's event will be held on Sunday, October 16th from 9am to noon at University of St. Martin, right in the middle of the Great Salt Pond, the seasonal home of many migratory bird species. The festival is brought to you by Les Fruits de Mer and University of St. Martin.

The festival is made possible by the generous sponsorship of Yacht Club Port de Plaisance, Lagoonies Bistro and Bar, Hotel L'Esplanade, GEBE, Delta Petroleum, BZSE Attorneys at Law, Buccaneer Beach Bar, Aqua Mania Adventures and ACE.





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