



The American Woodcock



The American woodcock is one of New York's most unusual upland birds. Approximately the size of a mourning dove, the woodcock has a bill that looks too long for its body, and ears that are placed forward on the face, between the eyes and the bill. To help guard against predation from above, its eyes are set high on the back of the head. The woodcock's odd appearance has inspired many local names like timberdoodle, bog sucker, mud bat, mud snipe and Labrador twister.

The brain of an American woodcock is unique among birds. The cerebellum, which controls muscle coordination and body balance, is located below the rest of the brain and above the spinal column. For most birds, the cerebellum occupies the rear of the skull. One theory suggests that as the woodcock evolved, its eyes moved back in the skull, its bill lengthened and the nostrils approached the base of the bill, allowing for better ground-probing abilities. As a result, the brain was rearranged, and the modern bird, in essence, has an upside-down brain.

The woodcock requires a diverse mix of habitats to thrive, including riparian shrublands and forests (land along riverbanks), as well as upland shrublands, early successional forests and forest thickets. Within these areas, second growth hardwoods provide important nesting habitat, while areas with thick cover and moist fertile soil with abundant worms are used as feeding grounds. In addition, the woodcock uses new clear-cuts, large fields or pastures for night roosting, and males need small openings in the forest to sing over.

Migratory birds, woodcock spend each spring and fall traveling between their breeding grounds in northern North America and their wintering grounds in the southern United States. They fly only at night, typically migrating at low altitudes of 50-100 feet. They may fly alone or in loose flocks called flights. If you are walking near moist thickets during these migration times, you might see signs of the woodcock: silver-dollar-shaped white splashes on the ground—the droppings or 'chalk' of these birds.

Woodcock are most active at dawn and dusk, usually searching for a meal. Their long bill is specially adapted

for probing into moist fertile soil for their preferred food of earthworms. A single bird can eat its weight in worms each day. Woodcock also eat other invertebrates, and have been known to eat ants from ant hills during times of drought.

Each spring, male woodcock perform an unusual courtship ritual in an attempt to attract mates. At dusk, a male will sit on the ground in an opening or small field and repeatedly utter a low, nasal, almost insect-like 'peent.' He then takes off low and spirals upward on whistling wings to heights of 100-200 feet before spiraling back down and landing near where he took off. He makes a chirping sound during this downward spiral. Males repeat this act again and again until well after dark.

Nesting occurs from mid-March into June. Females lay their eggs—one per day—in shallow depressions on the ground among dead leaves. Most nests have four eggs, and incubation takes approximately 21 days. The chicks are precocial and can move around and follow the hen soon after hatching. Chicks grow very rapidly on a diet of earthworms and insects. By the time they are four weeks old, it is difficult to distinguish the chicks from adults. Male woodcock are not involved in nesting or brood rearing.

The woodcock's mottled brown to black body enables this bird to blend in with the forest floor. As such, they are difficult to spot and will often startle you if you walk by them. When flushed from the ground, these birds flutter up through the thick canopy, level off over the top and then fly away. Wind moving through their wings makes a whistling sound as they go. Although they sometimes fly considerable distances, they usually only fly short distances of 10 to 20 yards.

Woodcock are a popular gamebird in New York and are pursued by many hunters. The hunting season for them is relatively short (30 days) and runs from early October into early November. Hunting woodcock is not for the faint of heart. The habitat of these secretive birds is usually very thick and difficult to walk through. As such, woodcock hunters often go out with a well-trained dog, which makes it easier to find the birds.

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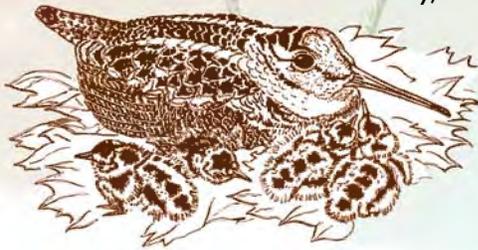


Woodcock Populations

Woodcock populations have been declining in the eastern United States for several decades. Annual spring surveys of their breeding grounds show that woodcock numbers in the eastern flyway and in New York have been falling by about 2 percent since the 1960s—a loss of over 55 percent in the last 40 years. As a result, national and international bird conservation organizations consider the American woodcock a species of continental concern, and protecting the woodcock is a high priority in its habitat ranges.

The woodcock's decline is attributed to loss of upland and wetland habitat due to development, succession, and forest maturation. In addition, the reduction in forestry practices, especially in riparian areas which are critical for breeding and migrating woodcock, also contributes to the loss in woodcock numbers. Woodcock depend on trees and shrubs that require full sunlight and open canopies. This only comes from disturbance to forests, which has been dramatically reduced by fire suppression and the reluctance to fell trees. This reluctance is based on the misconception that cutting trees is bad for birds and wildlife. While cutting trees can negatively impact some wildlife species, proper forest management actually increases the abundance and diversity of some birds and forest wildlife in an area.

Woodcock are not alone in this struggle. There are many other species that rely on the early successional shrub and forest habitats. In fact, most of New York's shrubland and early successional forest bird species are experiencing widespread declines. Ironically, the bird and wildlife species of mature forests, often touted as threatened, are actually doing well overall; it is the early successional species that need more help and habitat.



Fortunately, woodcock populations, as well as other early-successional-forest species, can often be readily restored through proper harvest management of forested lands. Cutting small 5-10 acre patches or strips through the forest in rotation creates a mosaic of different age forests with diverse structures. These areas provide everything the woodcock needs to survive and prosper—good cover, abundant food, and openings for singing males.

Woodcock Facts

- ❖ The woodcock's long bill has a flexible tip specially adapted for probing into moist soil in search of earthworms.
- ❖ It can eat its weight in worms each day.
- ❖ Its large eyes have nearly 360° vision.
- ❖ It is capable of flight speeds of 30 mph.

An adult American woodcock measures:

Weight: 8-12 ounces

Length: 10-12 inches (including bill)

Wingspan: 17-19 inches

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