

American Woodcock

The American woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) is known by many names due to its unique appearance and curious behaviors. As a member of the Scolopacidae family, it is considered a shorebird, despite its preference for woodlands. In the 1960s, scientists noticed a steady decline in woodcock populations, likely due to a lack of early-successional forests. Woodcock require a diverse landscape to support their feeding, nesting, displaying and roosting habitat needs. Today, through collaborative conservation efforts, their populations have stabilized, but their habitat still needs consistent management. Woodcock serve as an umbrella species; by protecting and restoring habitat for woodcock, many other young forest species benefit.

IDENTIFICATION

Woodcock are small birds with a football-shaped body, stout, rounded wings and a long thin beak. They have mottled brown, black and beige plumage with black stripes running horizontally across the crown. The tail is red and black, belly buff/orange.

Length: 9.8 - 12.2 in

Wingspan: 16.5 - 18.9 in

Weight: 4.1 - 9.8 oz

Lifespan: Up to 7 years

LIFE HISTORY

Range and Habitat: Woodcock can be found throughout the eastern and central United States. Northern populations are migratory, spending part of their lives in northern breeding grounds and flying south to the Gulf states for the winter. Southern populations do not typically migrate. During the summer, woodcock require forest openings or fields adjacent to a young forest consisting of dense shrubs and small trees to act as a “singing ground” where they display for females. Females nest in vegetated fields, young forests and shrub-thickets close to the singing ground. Both sexes can be found in nearby wetlands, bogs and other saturated soils while foraging.

Behavior: Woodcock are solitary apart from chick rearing. They arrive in Rhode Island around March to breed and remain in the state until the fall. Some birds may stay in Rhode Island during mild winters, but this is uncommon. Woodcock rely on their ventrally located eyes and camouflage to avoid predators. They remain hidden in dense brush on the ground, unless flushed. If frightened, woodcock will fly up into the air, flapping their wings and producing a whistling sound as the air rushes past their feathers.

Food Habits: Woodcock have specially adapted, highly sensitive beaks that are used for probing in wet soil. They poke their long, thin beaks into the mud, feeding primarily on worms, but will also eat other small invertebrates such as beetles, ants, spiders and crickets. Woodcock sometimes rock their bodies backward and forward as they forage. This rocking motion may cause earthworms to move, allowing the woodcock to more easily detect them in the soil.

Reproduction: Woodcock nest in shallow divots on the ground, as early as March. The female incubates the four eggs until they hatch around 20 days after the last egg was laid (April – mid-June). When chicks hatch, they are covered with fluffy brown and gray down feathers and leave the nest within a few hours. Females feed the chicks for less than a week and after about a month, they are fully grown and completely independent.

WHAT IS THE “SKY DANCE?”

Male woodcock have one of the most elaborate mating displays. They select an open space within a young forest, or along a forest edge, and begin their dance. The male makes a buzz-like “peent” call from the ground, turning to project in all directions. He then flies high up into the air, his wings whistling as the air travels past. After hovering for a minute at the peak of his flight, he calls out while spinning slowly and gracefully back to the ground. He repeats this process for about an hour, every dawn and dusk during the early spring.

Threats: Eggs are prey to cats, canines, crows, ravens, opossum, skunks and snakes. Predators of adults are similar but also include owls and hawks. Birds are at risk of accidents, while flying at night and can perish from exposure if caught in bad weather. The greatest risk to woodcock populations is loss of habitat. Where forests would naturally reset in the past after floods and fires, these events are now repressed, which allows forests to mature. This stage of mature forest is not suitable habitat for woodcock. They depend on the dense brush of young forests to protect them and their nest from predators and without it, they will not survive.

REGULATORY STATUS

Woodcock are protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. “The Migratory Bird Treaty Act makes it illegal to take, possess, import, export, transport, sell, purchase, barter, or offer for sale, purchase, or barter, any migratory bird, or the parts, nests, or eggs of such a bird except under the terms of a valid Federal permit.”

Woodcock are a game species in Rhode Island and are hunted in the fall. The law requires that each hunter acquires a hunting license and HIP permit, which can be obtained through the web-based online licensing system www.ri.gov/dem/huntfish.

Woodcock provide food and sport for hunters, and hunting permit sales generate funds for state wildlife conservation and management. In addition, revenue from hunting license fees and federal excise taxes on sporting arms and ammunition is distributed back to Rhode Island in the form of grants from the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program. These grants are used for land acquisition, facility maintenance, wildlife management, and all the programs established for management and hunting in the state.



A woodcock exhibiting its amazing camouflage, Romeo D'Andrea

DID YOU KNOW...

- The woodcock is also called the timberdoodle, night partridge, bog sucker and mudbat.
- The woodcock's distinctive buzzing “peent” can be heard in early spring at dawn and dusk
- Each year, males perform an intricate “sky dance” to attract females.
- Woodcock use their long beaks to probe for worms and other insects in the ground.
- Females will feign a broken wing to draw predators away from their nest.
- Woodcock are considered shorebirds and are in the sandpiper family.
- Woodcock migrate during the night and can travel up to 300 miles in one shot.