

American Woodcock

Magic happens at twilight. Twilight is magic, maybe. It must be... This is when I happened upon one of the most magical things I've ever seen. Out for an early evening walk on October 22, 2005, I was just at the edge of the woods, beginning a climb up a hill. The flashlight lit the path, and suddenly some type of bird manifested itself. It seemed to come to life, to have formed from the leaves. Startled, I grasped for a thought. Perhaps a quail. But then it turned to the side and I saw that magnificent beak. Then I noticed the enchanting eyes. The rich, beautifully patterned feathers. I was actually seeing the secretive American woodcock.

I was astonished that it didn't fly away. It just stood there for several seconds, letting me gawk. This elusive bird was right here. Then, the spell was broken, by my dog of course. Galumphing he came and the bird arose, flapping those wings while the body remained upright, vanishing into the trees above.

Sky Dance

As fantastic as this encounter was, I didn't witness the spectacle that has launched naturalists into lyrical linguistics. The oft referenced "sky dance" as "the father of wildlife management" Aldo Leopold said. As is well known, Leopold gave a vivid account of this dance in his book Sand County Almanac published in 1949.

The male woodcock engages in this fantastical display at dawn and dusk, beginning in late December in Alabama, peaking in late January to early February. He begins by "peenting". This call will stop and then he will take flight, ascending higher and higher while swirling and swirling, "twittering" all the while.

At a height of maybe 200 feet, he will begin his falling dive toward earth. When he nears the ground, he will land at perhaps the same spot he began and commence to "peenting" again. These

displays last 45 minutes to an hour. On moonlit nights, he may repeat the displays several times.

These displays occur in most

types of clearings such as fields, bogs, trails, orchards, etc. The American woodcock has even been sighted using power line right of ways, when proper cover exists. When woodcocks find a clearing they fancy, they will use it regularly provided it doesn't become overgrown. Surprisingly, the purpose of these displays has not been studied. Scientists believe some possible functions are to attract females, make his presence known, or as a response to other male woodcock displays. Most sources presume that it is a mating display, though it continues long after breeding.

Decline

Because the American woodcock is secretive, information regarding its prevalence is incomplete. Here in Alabama, the birds live year round, though their numbers may be less in the breeding season when many birds head north.

In the central part of the U.S., of which Alabama is considered a part, American woodcocks have declined by 1.8% per year, from 1968-2003. The decline is believed to be due to both maturation of young forests and development. The woodcock was considered rare in early twentieth century Alabama according



to Birds of Alabama, 1924, the only exception being Mobile County in winter.

In addition to vanishing habitat, the American woodcock has plenty of predators. Snakes eat eggs and both avians and mammals pose a threat to the woodcock at all stages. Unfortunately, the domestic cat is believed to be a major predator. The woodcock is also a popular game bird, and according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, about 2 million are shot annually. The impact of hunting is unknown. In parts of the country, some restrictions have been instituted in order to study the effects.

The area where I sighted my very first American woodcock is considered typical woodcock habitat. American woodcocks need small clearings in a moist forest with hardwoods or pines, or a mix. They are also quite happy with young growth forests or brushy fields. Shrubby growth enables the woodcock to mine for worms while staying hidden. Swamps are also favored by woodcocks.

Worm Fiddling, Bill Tugging...

American woodcocks primarily eat earthworms; one look at the bird and you can see why. Woodcocks are made for earthworm digging. The bills leave

small holes in the ground where they tunnel for worms. The long bill measures from 6.6-7.8 cm. It is a multi-purpose tool, for not only does it dig, the lower part acts as tweezers, and it seems to serve as a sort of vacuum. How else to explain how the birds can eat 22 earthworms in five minutes? That bill may even serve as a sensory tool since the tip contains special nerve endings. (It is also possibly used as a weapon. Apparently, though American woodcocks are rarely aggressive, males have been observed engaging in bill tugging.)

...Forest Floor Dancing Fowl

Scientists suspect that the American woodcock is a worm-fiddling machine in a funny bird shape. The bird has been observed doing a funky little rocking motion while leaning heavily on one foot. *Sesame Street* watchers who remember the "Funky Chicken" song may find a particular connection here.

Anyway, scientists think that this creates vibrations, which in turn cause shallow earthworms to reveal themselves. Even the position of the eyes enables the woodcock to see predators when probing for worms. The ears are located in front of the eyes, which may enable the woodcock to hear worms. And as an interesting side note, the brain of the woodcock is upside down.

American woodcocks will eat other insects, depending on locale. Some foods include snails, millipedes, some beetles, and spiders. Sometimes they may eat berries.

Migration, Nesting and Brooding

Migration for the American woodcock begins in September. In the South, most have arrived by mid December. The woodcock is one of the earliest birds to arrive north for spring migration, with most having moved north by late February. Woodcocks migrate at night, probably flying alone or in small groups.

For American woodcocks who will spend breeding season in Alabama, females begin laying around February 4th. The ground nests are usually located in mid aged mixed forests with open areas, in lowland areas. Sometimes the nests may be no more than

leaf litter, other times the leaves and twigs may be arranged in a bowl shape.

The female American woodcock will usually lay four eggs and will incubate them alone. Brooding is only known to occur once yearly. During early incubation, the females often desert the nest if disturbed. The male woodcock does not participate in nesting or raising the young.

After about twenty-one days, the young hatch and are able to leave the nest together within a few hours. The young take food from the mother woodcock's bill and she will feed them until they are around 31-38 days old, at which time they become independent. At this age, the young are almost full size. At three to eight weeks after independency, the immature woodcocks will leave the nesting range.

If an American woodcock reaches adulthood, it can expect to live 1.8 years. The oldest known American woodcock is eight years. The roly-poly elfin appearance of the American woodcock has ensured it a list of names. From various sources I found these names: mudbat, mudsnipe, timberdoodle, bog sucker, night partridge, little brown ghost and Labrador twister.

Maybe if you are very lucky or just diligent, you will find an American woodcock fiddling for worms or doing a "sky dance". There have been a few reported sightings in North Alabama in the past year. Each is to be celebrated. If you see one, you may feel as if you have glimpsed into a mythical fairyland.

-Anita Smith

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For more information:

Cornell Lab of Ornithology:

All About Birds

http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American_Woodcock/lifehistory

USGS

<http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/id/framlst/i2280id.html>

Timberdoodle.org

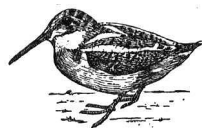
Ruffed Grouse Society

<http://www.ruffedgrousesociety.org/>

The *Ruffed Grouse Society's* National Woodcock Migration Mapping System is back through April 2010.

A majestic and formidable species...his eye is brilliant and daring, and his whole frame so admirably adapted for his mode of life and method of procuring subsistence, as to impress on the mind of the examiner the most reverential ideas of the Creator.

-Alexander Wilson,
writing about the ivory-billed woodpecker, as quoted in *The Race to Save the Lord God Bird*, Phillip Hoose



American woodcock (nearly 1 ft. long, including the long bill). The European woodcock is longer.

