

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



The American woodcock is a plump, short legged bird with a long straight bill for probing. Their large eyes are situated high on their heads to watch for danger while for food in soft soil. Photo: J. Morton Galetto

Sky Dancers

A sure sign of spring in overlapping habitats along the Delaware Bayshore is the American woodcock putting on its courtship display.

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

I think of March like a spring teaser. The *Farmer's Almanac* describes this month as "In like a lion, out like a lamb." In Southern

New Jersey it is a bit more of a roller coaster ride. Cloud cover provides shade over our heads and then a sunny blue sky turns swiftly back to winter's bleakness. Sometimes we get a number of warm days in a row – preview of spring.

If we have some evenings that exceed 50° F., we may get treated to a much-talked-about, little-seen courtship display – what Aldo Leopold described as a “sky dance,” performed by a woodland bird called the American woodcock. Unlike their shoreline cousins, the Wilson snipes, red knots, sandpipers, and the like, woodcock prefer swampy borders, shrubby fields, and woody edges.

In recent articles, we mentioned that *ecotones* are areas where different habitats meet or overlap, and that many animals seek these spaces. The woodcock is especially fond of places where forests wetlands and fields are in close proximity to one another. The Southern New Jersey Delaware Bayshore wetlands, swamps, and forested borders, which offer a lot of interfacing of habitats, are highly desirable to these birds.

Open fields along wooded swamps are a hot spot for woodcock courtship flights. Their “sky dance” begins at dusk, with a male

making "peent" calls to attract a female. This is described as a buzzy nasal call. For me it sounds a bit like a mechanical truncated sound, a broken-buzz tone doorbell. On one recording a faint hiccup was noted before each buzz, but honestly had it not been pointed out I would not have noticed it.

After the desired number of "peents" and some dancing, the male takes to the sky in a slow spiral climb that generally goes 200' in the air to as high as 350'. His wingbeats create a twittering sound, with some rapid whirring chatter, as he makes a near free-fall zig-zag and lights back upon the ground.

Then the courtship flight begins again. I've not seen the ground dance at night, but what is described sounds much like the groovy little seesawing walk they use when foraging for invertebrates and, primarily, earthworms.

(please scroll down)



Photo credit: Keith Ramos USFWS

Woodcock have one brood per season. They typically lay four eggs and up to five. Their chicks are precocial (meaning mobile at birth) and capable of some independent activity. Their lifespan is eight years. Photo credit: Keith Ramos, US Fish and Wildlife Service

A number of YouTube videos feature this movement as a “Funky American Woodcock,” and indeed it is. Naturally the videographers can’t resist putting this to music. Envision the bird taking a step, then rocking its body while leaving its head nearly in line with the same spot on the ground. It’s like a porch swing moving, but its anchored spots – its head and feet - remaining fixed as the body rocks. The birds lift and lower their back and shoulders, a tad analogous to the swing’s seat. Often they take a step forward, but at other times they simply stay still. Forward movement is extremely slow and sometimes imperceptible.

There are a few theories about this little rocking strut. One is that it allows the bird to sense worms when foraging. Biologist Dr. Bernd Heinrick, professor emeritus University of Vermont, suggests that the display saves energy when the birds feel threatened by being observed, rather than their exploding off the ground into flight. Possibly he means they simply mesmerize you; honestly it is nearly hypnotic. Chicks are known to rock-out as young as three to four days old.

I'm not certain what is happening and why, but I'm sure that if you see one doing its rocky little strut you will NOT forget it. One day I watched one strut on Maple Avenue in Dividing Creek for nearly 15 minutes while wondering, "What the dickens is this bird about?" And then, "Well, just do what you're going to do." Only to find out it was doing just that, simply rocking!

A few weeks ago my husband came into the house and said, "You'll never guess what I saw a woodcock doing." To which I said nonchalantly replied, "Uh, rocking."

"Yes! It was really something to see; he just kept rocking. It was comical."

Nonetheless, a woodcock is also very capable of explosive flight. They let out a high-

pitched doodling call when they take off that is intended to startle you. Whenever I lead a walk and one bursts into the air someone is alarmed and asks, "What the heck was that?" To which I reply, "A woodcock whose nickname is 'Timberdoodle' because of the sound they make when taking to flight."

Woodcock are game birds but many a hunter never gets a shot off because of their startle response – exactly as the bird intended. Northern woodcock migrate through and winter in New Jersey, and we also have a year-round population.

New Jersey Fish and Wildlife relays that while woodcock occur across the state, 50% of the harvest occurs in Sussex County and 25% in Cape May County. This species, like waterfowl, is federally regulated and requires a special federal stamp to hunt; a hunter can take up to three birds. This past year the Southern New Jersey 2023-24 hunting season was November 11- December 2 and December 14 – January 2.

Should a hunter recover from the initial surprise, the agile woodcock can navigate its flight through a heavily wooded area at 30 miles an hour! So they can be challenging to take down. Many hunters don't seek them because they taste rather earthy or muddy.

Woodcocks can also make impressive migratory flights. Dr. Erik Blomberg, Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Conservation Biology, University of Maine, studies these birds. He found that migrating woodcocks typically travel 870 miles over a month's time, because they feed and rest along the way. But he also recorded that some travel hundreds of miles in one night, and one bird was recorded flying 500 miles in a single evening.

Woodcock are especially designed for foraging on earthworms and other invertebrates. They have a long malleable beak that they use to probe into soft dirt. Their eyes are placed high on their head so that when they are probing with their head down their eyes are able to watch for overhead predators. Unfortunately, earthworms absorb contaminants such as cadmium, lead, and pesticides from soils, all of which are then also introduced into the woodcocks' diet when they consume them.

A number of birds use a strategy to protect their young known as a "distraction display." Woodcocks feign a broken wing to lure predators away from their chicks. A number of ground nesting birds who have young on the ground in tow will tumble about or drop a wing. Killdeer and shorebirds often employ this ruse as well. I've also had two wood

ducks successfully distract me from their chicks.

Woodcock are very difficult to spot. They are mottled with striated feathers in varying shades of brown and black, making them amazingly well-camouflaged in leaf litter. They are regular visitors in wooded sections of our yard each fall and winter because we live in appropriate habitat along the Maurice River. I see them because my dogs are specifically bred to detect them and other game birds.



A Brittany points a woodcock. Its feathers offer perfect camouflage in fallen leaves. See if you can find it following the dog's nose! Photo. J. Morton Galetto.

When one of our dogs points and freezes like a statute, generally it will be a woodcock's scent that has caused its instinctual response. Even with the help of the dog, if the bird is sitting upon an open patch of leaves it takes me some time to distinguish it from the background, and sometimes I still fail to see it. The knowledge that it will make a racket when it takes to flight doesn't necessarily keep me from being taken aback, much like a child with a Jack-In-The-Box; possibly the anticipation makes it all the worse!

And then I will think, "Just as intended – nature's surprise."



In 2018, Seamans and Rau (US Fish and Wildlife Service, Div. of Migratory Bird Management, reported that over the past 50 years the American woodcock has experienced population wide long-term declines of 1.1% percent year. American woodcock are only present in the eastern part of North America. Photo: Mark Moschell, Flickr.

Resources:

American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) Migration Ecology In Eastern North America, Compiled by: Alexander Fish, Dr. Erik Blomberg, and Dr. Amber Roth, Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Conservation Biology, The University of Maine
American Bird Conservancy American Woodcock, abcbirds.org

2023-2024 Migratory Bird Season Information and Population Status. New Jersey Fish and Wildlife (NJFW) finalized 2023-24 migratory bird hunting seasons. Dep.nj.gov.

Seamans, M.E., and R.D. Rau. 2018. American woodcock population status, 2018. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Laurel, Maryland.