

American Woodcock *Scolopax minor*



Folk Name: Timberdoodle, Night-flit

Status: Resident

Abundance: Rare to Uncommon

Habitat: Wet fields, moist woods, edges of marshes, muddy pastures

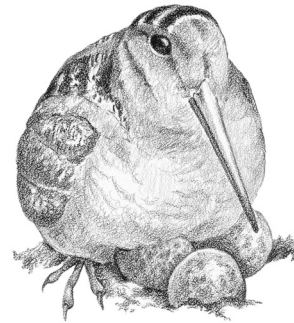
The American Woodcock is perhaps our most anatomically peculiar bird. At first glance, it appears like a big snipe with a barred crown and nape instead of a striped crown. However, a detailed inspection of its skull reveals several unique differences. Its eyes are larger and are set higher and farther back on its head, allowing the bird to see both above and behind it as it bends down to feed. Indeed, they are set so far back that this bird's ears are actually situated in front of its eyes. In addition, the woodcock's brain is almost upside down in its skull—having shifted both backward and downward from the position of most sandpipers' brains. Together, these adaptations allow the woodcock to react instantly when danger threatens.

The woodcock's bill is also unique. It is especially adapted for pulling up worms and other invertebrate prey from below the soil surface. It is long and the tip is sensitive to both touch and pressure allowing it to easily sense prey underground. The upper mandible has a flexible hinge near the tip that enables it to lift up and clamp down on its prey while the bill remains inserted in the mud.

The American Woodcock is a permanent resident in the Central Carolinas. Our small year-round breeding population is bolstered during the winter with migrants descending from breeding grounds in the North. Tower kill specimens collected in the region indicate these low-flying winter visitors generally arrive in mid-October into November and depart in late February to mid-March.

Woodcock reside in wet woods during the day. At dusk, they move from the woods into the edges of moist fields and hillsides (with rich, low-clay soils) to feed and roost throughout the night. They return to the protection of the wet woods at dawn. Woodcock are cryptically colored and can completely disappear in the leaves of the forest floor or the stubble of a wet field. At night, a flashlight can be used to reveal their presence by spotting the bird's eyeshine.

Researchers on several studies in North Carolina detected woodcock by their eyeshine, netted the birds, banded them, and outfitted them with radio transmitters to learn more about their seasonal movements. They found that, unlike other sandpipers, woodcock tend to be solitary in nature and they move around a great deal on their wintering grounds. If the ground freezes or dries



out for a long period, they will abandon that site. This behavior can make them a challenge to find. Our highest single day count in this region is fewer than 15 birds.

“No bird so stirs the heart of the average sportsman as the Woodcock, and the rumor of its appearance in any place is sure to send one or more enthusiastic gunners to explore the neighborhood.”

—*Birds of North Carolina*, 1919

Since the early days of European colonization, the American Woodcock has been an important game bird in this part of the South. They are considered to be quite a challenging prey as they are both hard to find and hard to shoot. Like the snipe, when flushed, they erupt wildly from the ground and spiral away at great speed. In fact, one North Carolina woodcock was clocked flying alongside a car at a speed of 55 miles per hour.

The early English explorer, John Lawson, was the first to report American Woodcock in this region as he passed near Charlotte in February 1701: “here is a good store of Woodcocks, not so big as those in England, the feathers of the Breast being Carnation-Colour, exceeding ours for the Delicacy of Food.”

Unfortunately, overhunting quickly became a problem for this species, and the woodcock was included on the list of game birds protected under North Carolina's early game laws. This account was published in Charlotte's *Evening Chronicle* on February 24, 1909:

It has been noted in the game law which has passed the Senate prohibiting shooting, trapping, netting or otherwise molesting birds in Cabarrus county for a period of two years, the woodcock is included in the list of protected birds. Time was when this bird was “quite plentiful,” as they say of “quail,” in Cabarrus. A hunter out for partridges could almost any day include a brace of woodcock in his bag, but

woodcock do not grow in covies and when a hunter bags a single bird, he might as well bag a pair. The woodcock inhabits the brier and broomsedge patches in the black jacks. It is a forest swamp bird. It is the same size as a partridge, but its plumage is a rich brown to match the fallen leaves of winter. Its bill is made for boring into worm holes and it knows how to use it. When food is scarce, by reason of dry weather, the woodcock has a way of securing a worm by a keen piece of deception. It will stand over a worm hole and peck on the ground, the thumping of its bill making a sound like the falling of rain drops. Thinking a shower is on the worm works his way to the surface to get his bath and finds himself an easy fit for the bill of the woodcock. The partridge and the woodcock are the finest table birds that fly. Here is hoping that both species, especially the woodcock, will thrive and multiply under the protection granted them in Cabarrus, the finest game county in the State and the one that has been ravaged more heartlessly than all the others.

The American Woodcock population declined nationwide during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Habitat loss and pesticides are other major factors that played a role in their decline. In 1931, birders were asked to help with an early “citizen science” initiative to help scientist’s and land managers better understand the needs of this species. Olin S. Pettingill Jr., close friend and classmate of Davidson’s Elmer Brown, was in charge of this project. Both were attending Cornell University at the time. Brown requested data from C.S. Brimley for use in the study and a request for assistance from the public was released:

How many people at the present time really know very much about this reclusive bird, the woodcock? To be sure many know where to look for it and how to hunt for it but concerning its daily existence they

know little. At Cornell University a definite attempt is being made to learn more about it and to settle many questions that have been under dispute since the first colonists found this bird a tender morsel for the table. All those who delight in hunting this elusive denizen of the swamps and boggy lands are asked to cooperate with the university by sending specimens or the viscera of the specimens if they so desire to keep the meat for eating purposes.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service initiated a more comprehensive national study in 1959. Woodcock hunters were asked to send in wings from all harvested birds for analysis. Using this wing collection survey data, biologists were able to develop an index of the reproductive success of the population. This population study morphed over time and now includes an annual singing-ground survey as well. Unfortunately, the long-term population trend has continued to decline significantly in the eastern region since the 1960s. At one point, the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission characterized the long-term population trend of the American Woodcock as changing from gloomy to grim.

The sky dance of the breeding “Timberdoodle” is truly one of nature’s most extraordinary spectacles. It is not to be missed. At dawn and dusk, the male woodcock sits in the center of his singing ground and slowly, but repeatedly, makes a nasal, buzzy *peent* or *wheent* call. He then bursts into the sky and performs a dramatic courtship dance, including looping spirals, barrel rolls, diving, banking, and zigzagging. Three modified primary feathers produce a twittering sound as the bird climbs. At the top of its climb, the bird begins to chirp loudly, which it continues as it begins its descent. Then he abruptly becomes silent as he nears the ground. Birders have observed these courtship flights in our region from the third week of December into March and the “Woodcock Walk” is one of the most popular field trips offered by the Mecklenburg Audubon Society each year.

Over the years, many nests of American Woodcock



American Woodcock in Mecklenburg County.
(Jarrett Wyant)



Woodcock chick survives prescribed burn at Cowan’s Ford.
(MCPRD staff)

have been discovered in this region. A few of these discoveries are described below. Nests with eggs have been found as early as the first week of February. They have contained clutches of either three or four eggs. Precocial young have been found as early as the second week of March.

William McIlwaine shared details from two observations in Charlotte. The first is from April 9, 1928, and the second is from April 21, 1930:

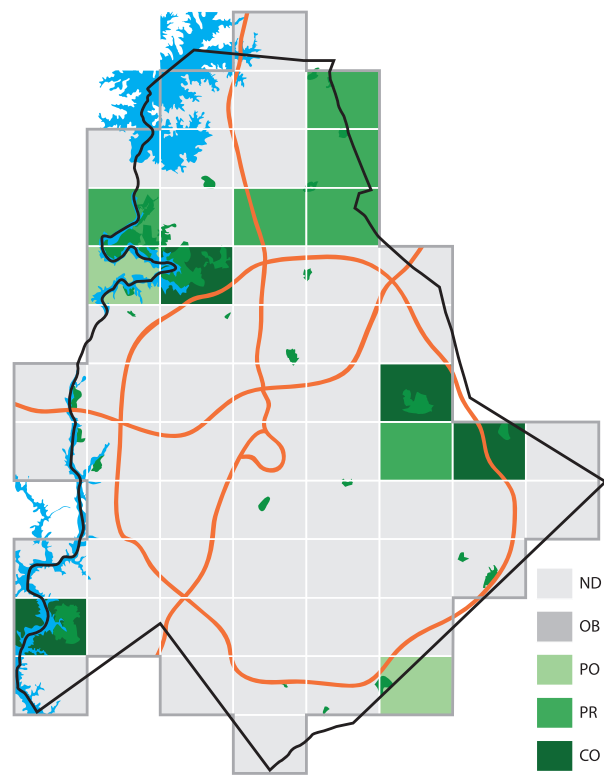
I had an experience Monday for which I was little prepared. I was walking along the edge of a grassy field, and like Harry Lauder's Tamas the baker, "thinking of nothing at all, at all," when with a flurry something whirred up from under my feet. Now listen, sportsmen! It was nothing but a woodcock. And I almost stepped on her three little babies. They lay there on their backs with their big feet above them, trying for all they were worth to blend with the grass. They were fluffy little things, very much like partridges or guineas, though of course their bills were nearly an inch long. They could scarcely have been more than two or three days old. I took a picture or two, and then hurried home for needed equipment in the hope of getting a group of mother and young. When I returned there was the mother bird brooding the little ones. She was so protectively colored that, though she is eleven inches long, and though she was out in the open, and though I knew within several feet of where she was to be found, yet I did not see her till I was almost upon her. And then I had to carefully point her out to the friend that was with me. I took one picture at ten feet, using a tripod; another at six feet; and I had adjusted my camera at three feet when she flushed. And all this happened within the corporate limits of Charlotte, with automobiles, and construction work and a hunting dog all in plain sight, and within calling distance of a great part of 81,000 people, who pass heedlessly every day.

But my find of the day was a woodcock and her family. Up she jumped right from under my feet, and started her flapping, flopping, tumbling stunt. And she kept it up with much agitation. I stood perfectly still looking all about me, but seeing nothing of the little ones. Then I stooped,—and right under my hand was a little woodcock nearly half grown. Slowly I lowered my hand and grabbed it. The little fellow struggled and cried. And it seemed that the whole thicket was alive with little woodcocks, crying and walking through the bushes with their wings outstretched. In reality I saw distinctly only two others. There may have been more. And I wondered if I had seen or heard the other old bird; but I feel quite sure I did not. But the old mother was raising cain. Pretty soon I let the little fellow go, and away he walked through the bushes in that

unsteady gait with wings out. It was worth the trip. I noticed that this little fellow had mud well up to the root of his bill. He was old enough to be feeding for himself. His tail feathers were just coming out well—possibly an inch long. Of course all this happened in a well-covered marshy place.

Elizabeth Clarkson reported "young out of nest by April 13" in Charlotte in 1943. Rhett Chamberlain noted that courtship flights began early in the Town of Matthews on News Year's Day in 1952. He suspected the early flight was due to mild temperatures. "The bird was apparently on the ground near the creek bed some 200 yards east of our house. After a few repeats, the calls stopped and we heard, from almost overhead, the peculiar, incoherent, multiple twittering that accompanies the Woodcock's courtship flight. It lasted for perhaps 10 seconds while the bird came down near our spring." Courtship flights continued in the evenings even in light rain and in temperatures as low as 41 degrees. In 1956, Chamberlain reported that woodcock began "singing" during the third week of January in Matthews. MCPRD staff photographed young on March 9, 2005, and nests with eggs on February 10, 2007, and March 20, 2015.

The American Woodcock is listed on the Yellow Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is a species with both "troubling" population declines and "high threats." It is in need of conservation action.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Somewhat Local (PR/6, CO/4)