

American Woodcock

Scientific Name: *Scolopax minor* Other common names: *Timberdoodles, wood snipe, bog sucker, night partridge*



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Introduction

The woodcock is one of our earliest returning spring migrants in Ohio. They are probably best known for their aerial courtship display, which begins as early as late February. Woodcock are native Ohio shorebirds that prefer a combination of wet, early successional understory and drier uplands. Their populations undoubtedly increased as early settlers made openings in the vast forest that covered the state. This species of woodcock is found only in North America, breeding in the northeast, year-round in the southeast, and wintering in eastern Texas, extreme southern portions of Alabama, Louisiana, and the southern half of Florida. They have been observed as migrants throughout Ohio and today they primarily nest in the northeast, northwest along Lake Erie, and in central Ohio where habitat is suitable.

Description

Woodcock are short, plump birds with a long bill and large eyes set high, and far back on the head. Their head appears to sit on the body with no neck. The 2.3-3.1-inch bill is perfect for probing wet soil in search of earthworms, their favorite food. The female is larger than the male, and has a longer bill. Plumage of both sexes is a "dead leaf" camouflage pattern of mixed brown, buff, gray, and black.

Reproduction and Care of Young

The male woodcock's courtship flight is spectacular to behold. At sunset he flies to the singing grounds and gives an insect-like "pœent" call, which may be repeated up to 200 times in a five-minute period. He then takes to the air, flying in a low circle about 200 feet in diameter, then climbing higher and higher in an ever-smaller circle until he is 200 to 300 feet high. As he climbs, his rapid wing beats create a musical twittering sound. At the apex of his flight he begins to emit his true song—a variable series of liquid notes—which he repeats several times as he zigzags erratically back down to his starting point on the ground. He may repeat this display over and over for half an hour or longer.

Woodcock are the earliest ground nesting species. Nesting habitat ranges from old fields with little shrubby vegetation to woodlots with an open understory. Typical nests in Ohio are found in reverting brushy fields or in young, second growth woods. The female woodcock makes a shallow depression in leaf litter, usually less than three feet from the base of a tree or shrub. Woodcock nests are often placed near the edge of wooded areas, not far from their singing grounds. The male does not participate in incubation or brood rearing. Females lay an average of four eggs, which hatch, in late April or early May. They tend the brood for approximately a month. Young begin probing the ground for food at about three to four days. They can fly short distances at 14 days and

sustain flight at 18-19 days. Woodcock usually have only one brood per nesting season unless the eggs or brood are destroyed and a re-nest is attempted. Young are independent at six to eight weeks of age and broods disperse.

Habitat and Habits

During spring migration woodcock are found throughout Ohio from late February through March. Woodcock probably breed in every county, although highest populations occur in the northeast, north central, and central regions. They are less numerous in the more agricultural regions of west-central and north-western Ohio. Woodcock migrate at night, alone or in small flocks. They usually head south by mid-November.

Woodcock habitat is characterized by moderate numbers of shrubs, seedling and sapling trees, interspersed with weedy or grassy openings. Young hardwood stands and old orchards near pastures or abandoned farmland are good roosting and feeding cover. Courtship dances take place on bare soil or in short grass close to woody cover. Good quality sites contain moist loam soils with plenty of earthworms, the woodcock's primary food. Signs of occupied habitat are half-dollar sized white splatter marks (droppings) and probe holes in the soil made while feeding.

Management Plans

Quality woodcock habitat calls for maintaining woodlands in early to moderate successional stages with interspersed open areas. Clearcutting can be used to eliminate undesirable vegetation, set succession back, and create openings for courtship displays. As those stands mature, adjacent older woods can be cut to maintain early successional growth. Wooded areas provide nesting habitat for up to 25 years if there are open fields nearby for courtship and summer roosting. Release cutting can be used to rejuvenate small areas with new growth. Cutting, controlled burning, or grazing can open thickets that are too dense.

Woodcock populations are monitored each year through singing ground surveys, the North American Breeding Bird survey, and wing collections of harvested birds. Christmas bird count surveys are conducted in wintering areas. Surveys have shown a long-term decline in woodcock populations.

Fall migration numbers are dependent on reproduction outside of Ohio. The elusive woodcock is a locally abundant but little-used resource in Ohio. A small contingent of Buckeye hunters enjoys the challenge of finding this bird among the bright fall foliage.

Viewing Opportunities

Woodcock are small, elusive, and highly camouflaged birds that are very difficult to observe. Usually the only glimpse we have of a timberdoodle is when it flushes at our feet while walking through the woods or field. By the time we regain our senses the bird is gone into cover. The best time to view woodcock is as the evening light fades in early spring and males begin their courtship ritual. Take a drive to suitable habitat in early to mid-March and listen for their distinctive "peent." Once found, watch for the spiraling upward flight and listen for the twittering sound of wings as the bird climbs higher and higher. As it descends, listen for the twittering and chirping sound to gradually increase and the bird comes into view, zigzagging back to its starting point.

Good opportunities to see woodcock displays occur at Watchable Wildlife areas such as Deer Creek Wildlife Area, Delaware Wildlife Area, Lake La Su An Wildlife Area, Killdeer Plains Wildlife Area, Shenango Wildlife Area, Killbuck Marsh Wildlife Area, Salt Fork Wildlife Area, Paint Creek Wildlife Area, and Spring Valley Wildlife Area.

Do Something Wild!

The Division of Wildlife manages for wildlife diversity in the state. We attempt to create and/or conserve the habitat that will support as wide a diversity of wildlife as possible. Many species like the woodcock are hunted in the state, but many more are not. The Division has a special program to manage and research nongame species that is supported by the generous citizens of the state of Ohio. With money either donated through the state income tax checkoff, by the purchase of wildlife license plates, or direct contributions to the Endangered Species Special Account, the Division is able to purchase critical habitat that is essential to sustaining many species of wildlife and to implement special efforts like the reintroduction of the trumpeter swan and the osprey to the state.

Contributions to our Wildlife Diversity Program are accepted throughout the year. To make a donation, please send a check to:

Endangered Species Special Account

ODNR Division of Wildlife, 2045 Morse Road, Bldg. G, Columbus, Ohio 43229-6693. All contributions, whether made on your income tax return or directly are tax deductible.

At A Glance

Mating: Polygamous

Peak breeding activity: April - May

Incubation period: 20 - 22 days

Clutch Size: 2-6 eggs; 4 average

Young are Hatched: March through June;
peak of hatch is early May

Young: precocial, leave nest when down is
dry. First flight at 18 days; resemble adults at 4
weeks

Number of broods per year: 1, if first nest is
disrupted, may reneest and lay 2-4 eggs

Adult weight: male 4-8 oz, female 6-10 oz

Adult body length: 10-12 inches including the
tail

Adult wingspread: 18 inches

Life expectancy: 2 years on average;
maximum 8 years

Movement: Migratory, breed in eastern U.S.
and Canada, arrive in Ohio late February
- early March, winter in southeastern U.S. Home
range: females 103 acres, males 183 acres.
Males travel further between singing grounds.
Depart Ohio in late October - November.

Feeding period: During the day in spring and
summer, at night during winter

Typical Foods: Earthworms, preferred; also in-
sect larvae, slugs, snails, insects, and some seeds
such as sedge, alder, smartweed, dogwood,
raspberry, and blackberry.

Native to Ohio: Yes

