

ON THE WILD SIDE

Waiting for the woodcocks

Linda S. Kollett

Usually in early March, my neighbor stops by to tell me that he has heard the woodcocks in the field behind my house. This is my signal to organize a “Woodcock Night” when friends come dressed for traipsing around in the field, binoculars and flashlights at the ready, hoping to see the spectacular mating flight of the American woodcock (*Scolopax minor*.) My mother is an ardent birder and for years I have heard her talk about the mating flights of the woodcock, so imagine my delight when I discovered that they live practically in my own back yard.

Woodcocks are extremely difficult to spot during the day – although a woodcock was spotted walking down a path at Wheaton College one afternoon! They are something of a puzzle as they are shorebirds that live in the woods. They are in the same family as the spotted sandpiper, greater and lesser yellowlegs and willets, sanderlings and other well-known shore birds. However, they live happily in the woods and are well adapted for foraging on the forest floor with excellent brown and black camouflage coloring and long beaks with flexible tips for capturing earthworms and other invertebrates.

Woodcocks live year-round in the south and their summer breeding range extends to Northern Maine. One of the earliest species to fly north to their breeding area, woodcocks are usually active from March into June.

So, what is so interesting about the American woodcock that we are drawn to celebrate its breeding display each year? In one of the most amazing displays of sight and sound, the male woodcock takes off from the edge of a field, soars high into the air and descends in a cycling pattern amid the musical twittering of its wings and harsher “peent” calling sounds and lands almost exactly where it took off. You can hear the calls and sounds at http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American_Woodcock/sounds.

We usually start our evening with a light dinner as the birds are crepuscular – they tend to be active at dawn and dusk. We try to move silently into the field. One of my friends has extraordinary ability to find woodcocks and also has an amazing recording of the mating sounds that tends to entice the curious birds into the field.



Photo courtesy of USFW Service

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At first all you can see in the dusk is glowing eyes. Woodcocks have eyes set far back on their heads. They actually have rearview binocular vision. Imagine being better at seeing what is behind you than what is in front of you! Then you hear a loud “peent” and begin to hear the strange whistling noise of the feathers as the bird takes off and soars into the evening sky. If you are able to see the bird before it takes off, it is easier to find it circling above you, but it often stands out against the fading light. You are certain to hear the whistling and the accompanying peents as it spirals down to its take off site. It is a treat to experience it.

The male birds like to put on their display, even after most of the females in the area have laid eggs, and the females continue to visit the display sites to see what is going on while they are nesting. So there are many chances to catch the show.

Woodcocks build ground nests and the females lay 1-12 spotted buff-colored eggs at a time. Males mate with several females, and are not known for parental care. Newly hatched woodcocks do need their mothers however. They don’t even start trying to probe for food until a few days after hatching. They are fed by their mothers for the first week.

Woodcocks have acquired all sorts of interesting names: sky-dancer, timberdoodle, Labrador twister, night partridge and bog sucker. In order to survive as a species they need shrub land, fields and young forests in their breeding ground. The Land Preservation Society of Norton (LPS) is actively encouraging the protection of open lands so that wonderful displays like the woodcock’s mating flight don’t become something we only read about.

Visit the LPS web site www.nortonlandpreservation.org or go to the National Wildlife Federation website: www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx

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