

## *Wild Things in Your Woodlands*

### American Woodcock



The American woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) is a medium-sized bird similar in size to a dove. Its bill is long in proportion to its body, which is round and heavy. It has a short neck and a large head. Its big eyes are set high on the bird's head, giving it 360-degree vision. This trait, along with cryptic brown and black coloration, protects the woodcock from predators. Both sexes look alike. Nesting occurs from mid-March into June. Females lay four eggs in a shallow depression on the ground, camouflaged by dead leaves. The precocial chicks hatch in about 21 days, and are raised entirely by the female.

The American woodcock, also known as the timberdoodle or bog-borer, is a popular migratory game bird that overwinters in the southern states. In March, the woodcock returns to its breeding grounds in the northeast. Returning males establish territories, or singing grounds, in open fields next to thick brush or woods. They often return to the same area year after year, defending their territories against other males. Singing grounds are typically openings of about one-quarter acre in size, with a straight, 20-30 yard take-off strip that is clear of impeding vegetation.

The courtship flight of the woodcock is an intriguing aerial display that can be seen at dusk and dawn beginning in late March or early April, and sometimes continuing into May. The best time to hear and see the display is between sundown and complete darkness. The male will take off and fly 200 to 300 feet up into the sky. His wings make a distinctive twittering sound as the wind rushes through his wing feathers. Upon reaching his upward destination, he spirals or zigzags back down to the ground, making a gurgling sound as he falls and landing back at his take-off site. Back on the ground, he sounds a nasal, insect-like buzzing call described as "peent" for several minutes, and then repeats his courtship flight.

Females seek out the males on their breeding grounds, and usually nest within 150 yards of the singing grounds where they mated. Favored nesting habitat includes damp woods near water, hillsides above moist bottomlands, old fields with low ground cover, briar patches, and edges of shrub thickets and young conifer stands. There may be little

overhead cover (old fields) or up to 50 feet of vegetation (hardwood stands). The average cover height is 12 feet.

Woodcocks feed on a variety of invertebrates and some plants. However, this bird favors earthworms, and its long bill is specially adapted for probing the ground in search of its prey. Sensitive nerve endings in the lower third of the bill help a woodcock locate earthworms. A special bone-muscle arrangement lets the bird open the tip of its upper bill, or mandible, while it is underground. The long tongue and the underside of the mandible are both rough-surfaced to grasp and pull slippery prey out of the ground. The best feeding habitat is pole-sized hardwood or alder stands with a dense overstory, fairly open ground cover, and moist, fertile soil that supports earthworms.

The best way to maintain habitat for woodcocks is to protect springs, seeps, moist depressions, and wetlands on your property. These areas provide important feeding grounds. Maintain, by burning or mowing, open grassy areas near water sources. These are prime nesting and courting grounds because of the water source and the food they provide. Maintain shrub cover in riparian areas and adjacent to wet areas for adequate cover. Alder, hawthorns, gray dogwood, spicebush, and silky dogwood are all good cover species for woodcock. Creating or maintaining areas of young forest will also provide singing grounds, and rejuvenate brood and nesting cover. By maintaining habitat for this unique bird, you and your family can continue to enjoy the courtship flights that usher in the spring.

*Kristi Sullivan coordinates the Conservation Education Program at Cornell's Arnot Forest. More information on managing habitat for wildlife, as well as upcoming educational programs at the Arnot Forest can be found by visiting the Arnot Conservation Education Program web site at [arnotconservation.info](http://arnotconservation.info)*

Is there a certain species of wildlife that you would like to see featured in an upcoming "Wild Things" column? If so, email Kristi Sullivan at [kls20@cornell.edu](mailto:kls20@cornell.edu)

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