

ABOUT THE COVER: AMERICAN WOODCOCK

The American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*), which Bent describes as the "mysterious hermit of the alders," once encountered, is not soon forgotten. The dumpy upland shorebird is easily identified by its plump, apparently neckless body, rapid wingbeat, and long bill, which points down as it flies. Most birders eventually make the crepuscular pilgrimage through wet fields, enduring countless mosquitos, to watch and listen to the nuptial flights of a male on his singing grounds. The sexes appear similar, although the male is smaller than the female. They are cryptically colored. Patterns of black, buff, russets, and grays make them virtually indistinguishable from the dried leaves in which they crouch, and from which they can explode in flight at a person's feet. Their reliance on camouflage for protection occasionally backfires: they show up rather well on closely cut lawns, and young birds will hunker down in the middle of a road as a car approaches.

Woodcocks breed throughout the eastern half of the United States, except for the Gulf coast and most of Florida, and through southern Canada from southeastern Manitoba to southern Newfoundland. They are migratory, wintering in the Gulf coast states and as far north as New Jersey, with major concentrations in Louisiana bottomlands. A few scattered birds winter over farther north. They are early migrants, sometimes appearing in Massachusetts in February, thereby experiencing occasional heavy mortality in winter storms. Most arrive in March, and by April the females are on the nest. The fall migration occurs primarily in October and November, when large flights are sometimes observed. Woodcocks are birds of the moist woodlands, boggy fields, and thickets. They prefer to nest near the edge of alder forests, where a thick understory prevails.

Woodcocks are promiscuous breeders. Males display from their singing grounds for females, which raise the young alone. The singing grounds are on open areas, often adjacent to streams, from which the males launch their courtship flights. Typically, the cock struts about at dawn or dusk, utters a series of "peent" calls, and then takes off on a spiral songflight several hundred feet into the air, wing twittering on the ascent as air rushes over his three modified outer primaries on each wing. At the top of his ascent he hovers and gives forth a song of liquid chirps, and then repeats these songs as he descends in a zigzag pattern. After a minute or two he repeats the performance. When a female joins him, he struts toward her, wings raised.

The rudimentary nest is usually a scrape outlined with a few twigs and often among fallen leaves. The clutch is typically four brown splotched, buff-colored eggs, which virtually disappear in the surrounding leaves. The young hatch in about two weeks and are precocial, following the female on foraging expeditions within a few days of hatching. A captive chick was observed to capture earthworms much like an adult by the third day after hatching. The

brood may remain together for six to eight weeks. Females will tenaciously sit on their nests and may be touched before bolting. Females with young perform distraction displays, and chicks tend to "freeze" when approached. A brooding female may make a labored flight with feet dangling to decoy off a dog or other predator, and they have been reported to carry away young between their feet, although the documentation on this reputed behavior is suspect.

Woodcocks are largely nocturnal and solitary feeders. They prefer a diet of earthworms but will eat a wide variety of invertebrates. They forage by probing their long beak into the soil and have evolved a remarkable set of adaptations for this foraging mode. Their upper mandible has high concentrations of nerve endings, which presumably aid the bird in foraging by touch. The upper bill is also flexible, with the distal half capable of movement, making the bill prehensile, and capable of grasping worms even when the bill is fully immersed in soil. Their legs are short, their bill is long, and the woodcock's eyes are set far back on the head and are large, presumably an adaptation to its crepuscular feeding habits. They stamp their feet, which may elicit earthworm activity, and hearing may play a role in their foraging behavior.

Woodcocks are a popular game bird. Their numbers decreased precipitously in the nineteenth century, largely due to overhunting, where a bag of one hundred a day was not uncommon. The woodcock population seems to have stabilized following passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918, which placed the hunting of woodcock under federal regulation. During the DDT era, pesticides may have affected populations, but habitat alteration may pose the greatest threat today. Wise management should, however, ensure the continued presence in our fields and forests of this strange-looking and enigmatic bird.

MEET OUR COVER ARTIST

Gordon Morrison's last cover portrait for *Bird Observer* appeared on the December 1992 issue. Gordon illustrated the recently released *Ecology of Western Forests*, part of the Peterson Field Guides series and authored by John Kricher. Gordon continues to write and illustrate a series, "Birds in the Garden," appearing in *Horticulture Magazine*, and recently featuring Cedar Waxwing, Western Meadowlark, and Blue Jay. Gordon also illustrates for *Horticulture Magazine* a series on native American plant species. In addition, the October 1993 issue of *Country Journal* includes a special section on birds, illustrated by Gordon. Portraits in the special section include birds in various habitats, birds in profile, and eggs in nests. Gordon can be reached at 52 Bulfinch Street, North Attleboro, MA 02760.