

The Sky Dance of the Woodcock

by Robert H. Stymeist, Waltham

In March, before the spring peepers set up their chorus, the American Woodcocks return to their nesting ground in Massachusetts. At morning or evening twilight their flight provides one of the most colorful courtship performances in the birding world. I was surprised recently to learn from fairly avid birders that they had never witnessed this spectacular exhibition; how little they know about this unusual shorebird.

Woodcocks (hunters sometimes refer to them as Whistler, Bogsucker and Timber Doodle) are fairly common in Massachusetts and breed in every county in the state, including Suffolk. They are more or less nocturnal and hide and sleep by day, being seldom seen unless flushed. They prefer low damp boggy places, bushy meadows, damp woodlands, but are sometimes found on hills, dry ground, or open pastures.

The Woodcock's bill is its most conspicuous feature. It is nearly 3 inches long; when probed in the mud, the sensitive nerves at the tip act as antennae, detecting the movement of earthworms, its chief food. The bill is "hinged" near the tip, enabling it to grasp worms under ground, pick up ants or catch flying moths. These curious adaptations are found only in Woodcocks.

There was a time when Woodcocks were nearly extinct. E.H. Forbush stated in Game Birds, Wild-Fowl and Shorebirds (1912) that in 1899, "Tens of thousands were killed by would-be sportsmen and thousands died of starvation. One man killed 400 Woodcock in just four hours". Such numbers are unheard of today. In seven nights in 1968, Woodcock biologists hand-netted and banded over 600 birds in a relatively small area in Cape May, New Jersey; twelve hundred were flushed.

To thrive, the Woodcock must have young forests containing woody plants a few inches high to trees a little taller than 30 feet. The density of vegetation must be relatively light for easy foraging. In hot weather Woodcock like to rest in dense shade, particularly under evergreens. Young aspens or birch ususally indicate good Woodcock cover.

Back to the courtship flight. The male struts around the female, bows and calls repeatedly a nasal "peent." He then rises high in the air with erratic flight and a variety of peculiar notes, some from the "whistling" of its wings and especially when it descends a twittering "chipper, chipper chip-chip" and then the "peent" again. They land nearly at the same place from which they left. I have sat quietly many times in a field, watched the male leave the female, (and when the whistling was barely audible) ran to that place and laid quickly on the ground. If lucky, the male landed within a few feet! Unfortunately, the female is flushed in the process, something the male also realizes! This game is fun, but do it only once or twice.

Some of the best known Woodcock display grounds are:

Ipswich River Wildlife Sanctuary, Perkins Road, Topsfield. This is probably the best and most accessible location, away from all traffic and distracting lights. The birds go up in the field in back of the barn. From U.S. Route 1, turn east on Rte. 97 at the traffic lights. Perkins Road is the first left. The Sanctuary is 1 mile on the right.

Scotland Road, Newburyport off Rte. 95. In back of Chase Shawmut off the shoe factory.

Plum Island Airport, Newburyport. Much noise here, but easily accessible after a birding trip to Plum Island.

Rock Meadow, Belmont, off Concord Avenue near the Lexington line. Long a favorite for Greater Boston birders, but traffic noise is unbearable. Go off the road to the right of the town incinerator and away from the road. The noise will lessen but it is still distracting.

Highland Farm-McLean Woods, Belmont off Concord Ave. Not far from Rock Meadow, fewer Woodcock but better viewing with less noise. Park on Somerset Street and walk into the meadow. McLean Woods is across Concord Ave. from the Tennis Club. Walk to the edge of the hill for best results, toward Rock Meadow.

Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, Sout Wellfleet. Entrance on west side of Route 6, immediately north of Eastham-Wellfleet town line.

Fort Hill, NATIONAL SEASHORE, Eastham. Entrance on East side of Route 6

Rock Harbor, Orleans. Area to the south.



SANDHILL CRANE, Bridgewater, Massachusetts, January 22, 1977. Photograph taken by Winthrop W. Warrington, Jr., with a Nikkormat Electric with a Novoflex 400 m.m. lens, 1/500 sec. at f 5.6; Kodachrome film #64.