

**MANAGING
YOUR
LAND
FOR
WOODCOCK**

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of Natural Resources
Section of Wildlife
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St. Paul, MN 55155-4007



Funding for this brochure was provided by the
Minnesota Forest Stewardship Program, and
the Ruffed Grouse Society



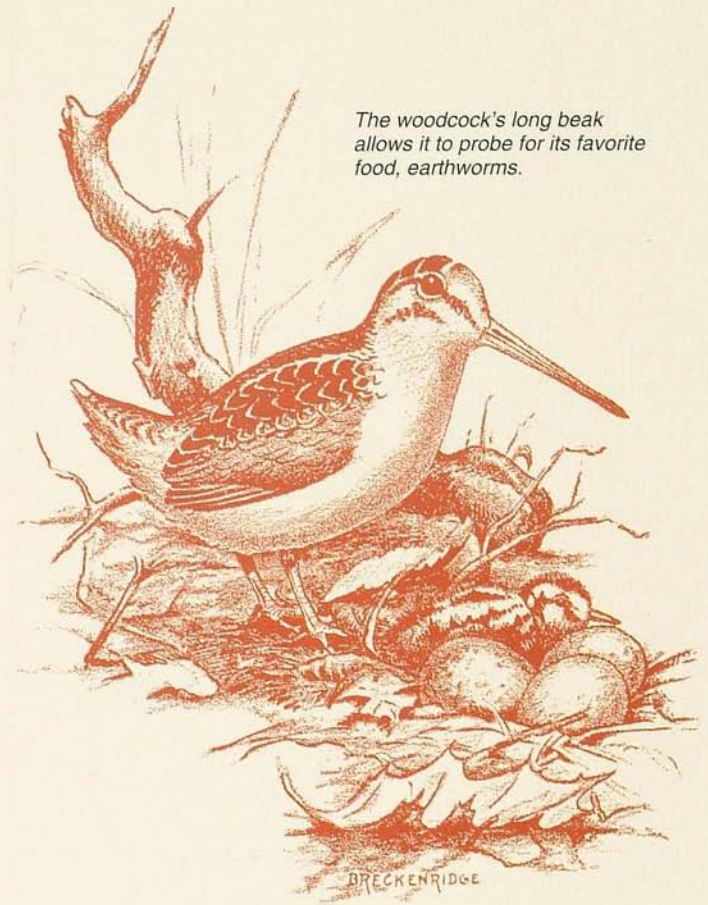
The Ruffed Grouse Society

Managing Your Land for Woodcock

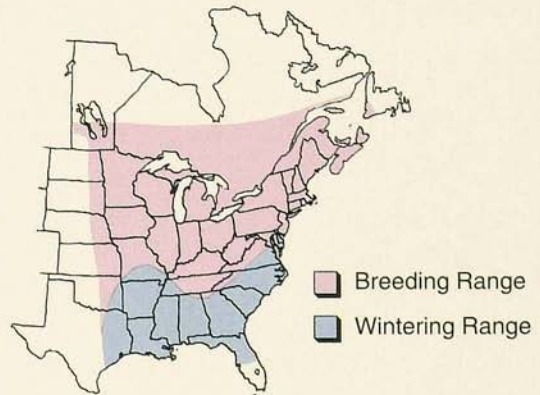
The American woodcock (also known as “timberdoodle”) is a member of the shorebird family, but long ago it abandoned the marshes and moved into the uplands. Unlike its closest relative, the common snipe, woodcock are forest birds. They are best known for their erratic flight pattern, spring mating display, and sudden appearances and disappearances during the fall migration. These birds provide recreation for thousands of Minnesotans—hunters and non hunters—each year.

Several unique physical characteristics enable a woodcock to stand out in a crowd. Its bill is extremely long (almost 3 inches) for such a small body, which stands only 8 inches high. The long bill allows a woodcock to probe moist soil and capture its primary food—earthworms. Most woodcock activity, including feeding, takes place in the dim light of dawn and dusk.

The woodcock’s eyes are located along the sides of its head, enabling the bird to see in all directions, including directly behind. Because the bird spends so much time with its beak in the mud, it needs to have a large field of vision to detect predators.



The woodcock's long beak allows it to probe for its favorite food, earthworms.



Woodcock breed throughout the eastern United States and southern Canada. They spend December through February along the south Atlantic coast in the states that border the Gulf of Mexico. Most woodcock that breed in Minnesota spend their winters in central and southern Louisiana.



Spring and Summer

Woodcock begin arriving in Minnesota in mid-March, often well before the winter snow is gone. Male woodcock begin their courtship activity as they migrate north in the spring. They often return to the same breeding area year after year.

A breeding male establishes a “singing ground” that it defends from other males. Singing grounds are small openings usually free of most woody vegetation and are often near dense shrubs or young forest stands, which provide nesting and brood-rearing habitat. Here, the male performs his unique courtship ritual to attract females.

The woodcock’s courtship performance lasts 30 to 60 minutes each day during the first and last hours of daylight. The male begins by giving a series of nasal sounds (*peents*). He then flies upward in a spiral pattern to heights of 100 to 300 feet. Rising into the dawn or dusk sky, his wings produce a twittering noise as the air rushes through the narrow, outer wing feathers. After reaching the peak of his flight, the male descends, emitting a series of vocal chirps until he glides to the ground near where the flight originated.

Each flight lasts for about one minute. The male remains on the ground a short while, repeating the *peent*, and then rises in another aerial display. Males repeat these displays a dozen times or more. During most years, breeding activity ends by early June.

Throughout the day and night, males stick close to their singing grounds in nearby dense stands of alder, hazel, dogwood, or young aspen (popple). Here they feed and rest until the light level signals the time to begin their courtship performance.

Only one out of every three or four male woodcock found in a given area takes part in the breeding ritual each spring. However, males who aren’t breeding hang around occupied singing grounds. This often causes the breeding woodcock to chase or even attack the unwelcome intruders—especially when the visit is during the mating ritual.

Female woodcock nest in or next to forest openings, often within 500 feet of a male’s singing ground. For a nest, the hen simply creates a small, cup-shaped depression in dead leaves that cover the ground. In it she lays four light brown eggs heavily blotched with darker shades of brown. She incubates her clutch for 21 to 22 days.




Woodcock typically lay four eggs in a simple nest near the edges of forest openings.

G. Gullion



Dan Dessecker

The woodcock's eyes are positioned to see in all directions, even directly behind its head.



When the chicks hatch, they are ready to leave the nest. Young woodcock depend on their mother to help them find insects, which make up most of their diet.

Young woodcock grow quickly and within two weeks of hatching, they can fly. As they mature, the birds begin to spend time in dense, young aspen woods or alder, where the soil is moist and earthworms are plentiful. At age 30 days, their primarily earthworm diet is essentially the same as an adult's.

By early summer, woodcock chicks are fully independent. Broods break up only four to six weeks after hatching. Most chicks produced in Minnesota are virtually on their own by the Fourth of July.



DNR Photo

Remnant fields invaded by brush provide ideal singing grounds, nesting, and brood habitat.

In midsummer, woodcock begin to roost in grassy fields at night and seek dense cover during the day. Old farm fields and large openings (more than 3 acres) in woods, some of which served as singing grounds earlier in the year, may hold dozens of woodcock on summer nights.

Fall

The fall migration begins when enough snow cover or cold temperatures that freeze the ground makes feeding on earthworms difficult. In northern Minnesota, the fall woodcock migration typically begins the first week of October and peaks during the middle of the month. During this time, birds may literally be here today and gone tomorrow. Migrants from farther north may arrive in great numbers, or they may trickle through in relatively small numbers on their way south.

How long woodcock remain in Minnesota during the fall migration depends on the weather. In most years, most have left the state by early November.

