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LIVING

One strange bird

The American woodcock is definitely different

A bird with nicknames such as pop-eyed shot dodger, Labrador twister, sky dancer and timberdoodle is obviously not your run-of-the-mill species. To naturalists and hunters alike, the American woodcock is

indeed something quite special. To begin with, what is this shorebird doing ignoring the sandy beach-and-mudflat habitat of its sandpiper cousins and making a living in forest-edge habitat? Choice of living quarters is only one of this bird's many quirks.



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

The woodcock is a common species in the Kawarthas, arriving back in late March from wintering grounds in the south-eastern states. Migrating birds will sometimes even

show up in suburban backyards and create quite a stir as people try to figure out the identity of the rather ridiculous-looking visitor.

The woodcock is indeed quite comical, with its bizarre anatomy and even stranger behaviours. It is similar in shape to a starling, but about a third larger. The upper body is a mixture of blacks, browns, tans and whites, while the underparts are cinnamon. This mottled colouration provides the bird with near-perfect camouflage against the dead leaves and twigs of the forest floor.

The woodcock also has very large eyes, located high and well back on the head. This unique positioning helps keep mud out of the eyes while the bird probes the ground for earthworms. The placement also provides a field of vision of 360 degrees. The woodcock can actually see in front, behind and above itself, allowing a view of approaching predators such as humans, goshawks and coyotes.

The adaptation is extremely important because, as we'll see later, male woodcock draw a lot of attention to themselves during spring courtship displays. A researcher who was studying woodcocks actually found three radio transmitters and two leg bands in a goshawk nest. They were the only remains of some overly conspicuous sky dancers that he was studying.

Like many shorebirds, the woodcock has an extremely long bill. It measures more than six centimetres (2.4 inches) in length. The bill allows the bird to probe deeply into soil for earthworms, which make up 50 to 90 per cent of its diet. The sensitive, flexible bill tip can feel a worm in its underground burrow and then open to grab it. This feat is nearly impossible for other birds. Numerous probe holes in damp soil and splashes of droppings are a sure sign that woodcock are in the area.

The bird's walking style is also quite different from other birds. It tends to walk very slowly and rock its body back and forth as it moves along. All the while, however, the bird's head remains motionless. This strange gait is accompanied by a kind of foot-stomping. It is thought that the stomping may cause worms to move around in the soil, thereby making them more easily detectable.

The woodcock behavioural claim-to-fame, however, is its famous aerial display, or "sky dance." From March until early June, the woodcock is in its glory as it performs one of the most fascinating courtship spectacles in nature. The male goes to extraordi-

nary lengths to show his devotion and virility to the female and to keep other males at bay. The courtship flights are performed over openings known as singing grounds.

Beginning in the evening twilight, shortly after sunset, the male starts to "peent." The sound is reminiscent of a buzzy toy horn. As darkness falls, the calls become more numerous until, all of a sudden, the bird bursts into the air and flies upwards in wide circles. Though you probably won't see the bird take off, you will hear it. Because the woodcock's three outer wing feathers are extremely stiff and narrow, and spread apart during flight, the air rushing through causes them to vibrate producing a high, mechanical, twittering sound.

After reaching a height of 70 to 100 metres (230-328 feet), the twittering becomes intermittent, and the bird soon begins a zigzag descent. A third sound is now produced as the woodcock starts singing liquid chirping notes. The chirping grows louder and louder as he approaches the ground, but then ceases completely for the final portion of the descent.

The woodcock usually lands almost at the same spot from where he took off. He then walks stiff-legged in the direction of the nearby female and once again begins the peenting. A few minutes later, the poor bird — probably close to exhaustion — launches into yet another flight. Males will display for up to an hour at dusk and dawn and even through the night if there is a full moon. Although the male woodcock gives no

parental care, he does continue to display long after the female has laid her eggs. All of the bird's various sounds can be heard at http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAbout-Birds/BirdGuide/American_Woodcock.html.

Woodcocks can be found all over the Kawarthas. It is a bird of habitats that are in transition, such as abandoned farmlands that are reverting back to forest. Woodcocks also frequent second-growth forest edges and damp, brushy fields of alder and poplar near wetlands. The fields south of the Peterborough Airport are often a good location, especially the area just east of Bartlett Road. Be sure to listen for the peenting sound. Because the darkening sky makes it difficult to actually see the woodcock in flight, try to face west. In this way, the bird will stand out against the lighter, western sky. After it takes off, you can move closer to the take-off point. By remaining quiet and staying low, it is often possible to get a close look at the bird when it lands. A flashlight may be necessary, however.

When I take students to Camp Kawartha each spring, we are usually able to approach within a few metres of displaying male woodcock by quickly sneaking up to his launch pad while he's in the air. Despite muddy knees, torn pants and the odd sharp stick in the side, the kids are always entranced by the show.

In April, females nest near the singing grounds. After three weeks of incubation, four eggs hatch into downy chicks that are ready to follow their mother. They are

almost fully grown at four weeks and are independent by summer.

Woodcock also garner considerable attention in the fall, because they are one of the few shorebirds that is regularly hunted for sport. Not only are they delicious to eat, but they also present an interesting challenge. They fly very quickly through the trees, making completely unpredictable twists and turns. An unnamed author in *Field and Stream* described their flight as 'the shortest distance between two points which includes two zigs, a zag and at least one drastic change in altitude.'

Long-term trends show a slow decline of woodcock breeding populations in eastern Canada of about one per cent a year. A loss of suitable habitat for courtship, nesting, feeding and over-wintering as a result of changing land uses is probably an important factor. Recent studies have also found high lead levels in the bones. The source of the lead remains a mystery.

Together with the jingling chorus of spring peepers and the spicy smell of emerging balsam poplar leaves, the sounds and acrobatics of the American woodcock typify a spring evening in the Kawarthas.

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The American woodcock (above). Its mottled colouration provides the bird with near-perfect camouflage against the dead leaves and twigs of the forest floor (inset photo).

Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner