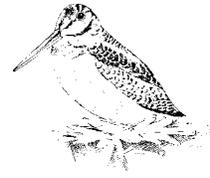




The Georgia Department of Natural Resources
Wildlife Resources Division
American Woodcock Fact Sheet



The American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*), a member of the sandpiper family Scolopacidae, is essentially a migratory shorebird that utilizes forests, fields, wetlands and riparian systems. Woodcock occur throughout central and eastern North America from southern Canada into the southern Gulf States.

In Georgia, woodcock occur both as a yearlong resident and winter migrant. They are known by a variety of common names including snipe, timberdoodle, night partridge and bog sucker. Woodcock might be confused with Dowitchers (*Limnodromus sp.*) and Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) but these species have different coloration, flocking behavior, flight patterns and habitat needs.

SPECIES DESCRIPTION

Woodcock are sexually monomorphic meaning that both males and females have essentially the same feather coloration and pattern. Their plumage consists of various shades of brown to light buff and gray. They are plump in shape, with short stocky necks, large round heads with a broadly barred crown and large brown eyes. Eyes are set far back on the head which facilitates a wide field of view to detect predators, even when feeding. Woodcock are about 10-12 inches in length with up to a 19-inch wingspan, and weigh up to 10 ounces. Females tend to be larger than males. Perhaps the most distinguishing characteristic of the species is a long narrow bill that ranges in length from 2 ½ - 3 inches. The bill is used to probe in moist earth for earthworms, insects and other foods; and has a prehensile tip that can be opened while inserted into the ground so as to facilitate food intake. Bill length, along with the combined widths of the three outer wing primaries, and the length of the wing chord (from wrist notch to tip of longest primary feather) can be used to distinguish the sexes; with females having bills that are typically greater than 2.8 inches, combined widths of outer three primaries greater than or equal to one-half inch and the wing chord length greater than or equal to 5.3 inches. The combination of these characteristics minimizes overlap when determining gender.

BIOLOGY

In Georgia migratory woodcock begin arriving around mid-October with peak numbers in mid-December. They begin returning north as early as February and birds remaining after March are most likely resident birds. Most migration occurs at night.

During the breeding season male woodcock perform a magnificent courtship display sometimes referred to as “sky dancing”. This acrobatic show occurs for a relatively short window of time at dusk and dawn. Males fly or walk from nearby cover to fields, pastures, orchards, clearcuts, wetland bogs, roadbeds or other openings. There they strut on the ground and make a “peenting” call that can be described as a short buzzing note repeated several times in rapid succession. The bird then flies in wide spirals above the display ground while making chirping or

warbling sounds and then rapidly descends back to the ground where the process begins anew. This display attracts females for mating. Sky dancing is most commonly observed in Georgia from December through February.

Female woodcock nest on the ground by making a shallow depression in the leaves and other dead vegetation on the forest floor. They typically nest in young forests and often within close proximity to the base of a tree or shrub. Woodcock will readily re-nest if their first nest is destroyed. The average clutch consists of four eggs that are pinkish buff to cinnamon and are speckled with varying shades of brown. The female incubates the eggs for 21 days. Upon hatching the chicks leave the nest within a few hours. The chicks require maternal feeding for the first week after hatching and begin flight at around 18 days of age.

Woodcock require a variety of habitat types to meet their daily and seasonal needs. Openings are needed for courtship display and ideally are interspersed with moist-soil riparian forest systems that have well-developed shrub layers, cane thickets and other cover to provide feeding grounds, loafing areas and protection from predators. Additionally, young sapling forests are preferred for nesting and brood rearing.

Woodcock feed primarily on animal matter, particularly invertebrates and especially earthworms. They do consume plant materials; such as seeds, but these constitute a low percentage of the total diet volume.

Like most other wildlife species woodcock are subject to a wide variety of mortality factors including pollutants, predators and disease. Since a high percentage of the woodcock diet is earthworms they may be particularly vulnerable to pesticides and other environmental contaminants. They have been shown to carry DDT, dieldrin, PCBs, mercury, heptachlor and mirex. Furthermore, it is safe to assume that numerous predators, including hawks, owls, various snakes, raccoons, opossums, bobcats, coyotes and many others readily eat the birds and/or their eggs.

Woodcock populations have declined throughout much of their range in recent decades. In fact, between 1985 and 2004 the U.S. Geological Survey Breeding Bird Survey data indicate woodcock populations declined by 2.7 percent per year in the Atlantic Flyway. This decline is suspected to be primarily the result of changes in land use, which have reduced or degraded early succession habitat and wetlands. Examples of landscape changes that may negatively impact woodcock in Georgia include, loss of old field habitat, reduction in the use of prescribed fire, lack of forest management, conversion of wetlands to other uses and increased urbanization.

UTILIZATION

Woodcock are a migratory gamebird in Georgia and are often hunted with pointing and retrieving dogs, commonly in association with quail hunting. When properly prepared they provide excellent table fare. Consult the current hunting season regulations for season dates and bag limit.