

27. AMERICAN WOODCOCK

Scolopax minor

SUMMARY

American woodcock are an important game species that spend the breeding season in Vermont. They require moist areas of dense alder, dogwood, and willow for nesting and roosting, and open grassy areas for their spring courtship rituals. To manage for this species, you should maintain young alder, dogwood, and willow thickets, and regularly mow and clear adjacent areas to keep them open and grassy.

NATURAL HISTORY

The American woodcock is an important game species in Vermont and throughout the northeastern United States. Woodcock are members of the shorebird family which include dowitchers, yellowlegs, and snipe. With their distinctive, long flexible bills, woodcock spend much of their day satisfying their voracious appetite by probing the moist soils of alder and dogwood swales and other moist depressions for earthworms and other soil invertebrates.

Woodcock are a migratory species. They are distributed throughout eastern North America during the breeding season and the summer, but retreat to the southeastern U. S. (principally Louisiana and east Texas) to spend the winter. Woodcock arrive in Vermont as early as March. Males usually arrive first to establish their territories.

Male woodcock seek abandoned fields and forest openings to perform their elaborate courtship flights with alternating nasally “peents” or songs while they are on the ground. These areas are commonly referred to as singing grounds.

Woodcock usually nest, rear young, roost, and feed on moist soils near their breeding grounds. Chicks hatch in late May and early June; they are well developed at birth and mature rapidly. The chicks remain with their mother for about one month until they are capable of flight. The males do not take part in any brood rearing activities.

When autumn weather is cold enough to freeze the soil, making it impossible to probe for food, the birds begin the annual trek to their wintering grounds. In Vermont, this journey occurs between mid-October and early November.

HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Woodcock make use of two distinct types of cover. The first are swales commonly composed of alder, dogwood, and willow in which they feed, nest, and rear their young. They also use recently abandoned fields or forest openings to roost and perform their courtship flights. Woodcock do not need large tracts of land; an area of 25 acres can suit their needs and can be managed effectively.

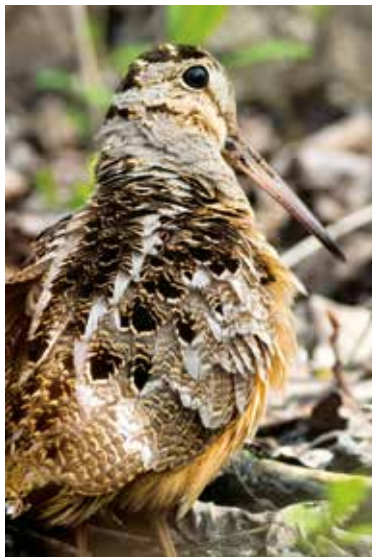
Woodcock do not need large tracts of land; an area of 25 acres can suit their needs and can be managed effectively.



Figure 27.1
Woodcock courtship habitat



Figure 27.2
Alder swale make excellent woodcock cover habitat.



Woodcock seek out wooded and shrubby areas for protection from avian predators, but that also have a good line of sight at ground level to easily spot ground-dwelling predators. Typically these are stands of speckled alder and gray dogwood.

Singing grounds used for courtship displays are typically surrounded by shrub species such as blueberry, goldenrod, and red osier dogwood.

The woodcock's diet is composed primarily of earthworms and other invertebrates found in rich, moist loam and sandy loam soils found along borders of water bodies, the flood plains of most water courses, and the edges of

beaver flowages. Other important foods include the larvae of flies and ground beetles. Studies have shown that a single woodcock can eat up to 90 percent of its body weight in a 24-hour period. Habitat management efforts should focus on maintaining and enhancing the feeding areas.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT

The woodcock's home range is relatively small, so as an individual landowner, you can have a very positive impact on local woodcock habitat. Alder and dogwood, the tree species which provide optimal cover, lose much of their value for woodcock after 20 years of age. To renew this cover, 25 percent of the feeding area should be clearcut in patterns of narrow strips (10 to 20 feet) or in small patches (1/4 acre) every 5 years.

Maintain open areas in a grassy or herbaceous condition near feeding areas for roosting and the performance of courtship rituals. They are best maintained by mowing or brush hogging every 3 to 5 years. Controlled burning and pasturing may also be effective, but do not provide the same degree of control over undesirable vegetation that mowing does. Small forest openings can be created and maintained if they do not already exist, but abandoned fields are preferred by the birds.

RESOURCES

U.S.D.A. Natural Resources Conservation Service. "Wildlife Habitat Insight 89 - American Woodcock: Habitat Best Management Practices for the Northeast." <http://directives.sc.egov.usda.gov/OpenNonWebContent.aspx?content=28815.wba>