



# American Woodcock

## North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



## American Woodcock

(*Scolopax minor*)

The American Woodcock is a remarkably well-camouflaged bird that inhabits moist forests across the eastern U.S. and Canada but is categorized as a shorebird. Unlike their coastal relatives such as the Red Knot and Dunlin, these secretive birds live far from any beaches. During the night, they spend their time probing the soil with their long bills to feed on earthworms and other invertebrates. The American Woodcock's nocturnal lifestyle, inconspicuous plumage and low-profile behavior make it typically quite difficult to find. However, at dawn or dusk in springtime, the males can be found showing off with their stunning aerial displays – what [Aldo Leopold termed a 'sky dance'](#). The American Woodcock is also known colloquially as the *timberdoodle*, *bogsucker* and *mudbat* or *mudsnipe* and is a popular game bird throughout eastern North America.

The American Woodcock has a unique brain structure: its cerebellum (the part of the brain that controls muscle coordination and balance) is below the rest of the brain and above the spinal column. The woodcock brain is essentially upside-down compared to other bird brains. This brain structure is attributed to the evolution of the long beak and the eyes set far back in the skull, which allows the woodcock to probe the ground effectively while keeping an eye on its surroundings.

### Description

American Woodcock are chunky and short-legged, roughly the size of a robin. They have large heads and short necks and tails, giving them a bulbous appearance. Their wings are broader and more rounded than most other shorebirds. Their feathers are a mottled mix of brown, black, buff and gray tones, providing excellent camouflage on the ground. Their underparts vary from yellowish white or buffy to almost orange. The bird has a plump body, short, weak legs, a large, rounded head and a long, straight bill. The bill, which looks too long for the body, is 2.5-2.75" long and has a unique feature that allows woodcock to open and close the tip of their mandible while it is in the ground. Large, round eyes are set far back in the skull, allowing a very large visual field; the woodcock is able to see 360° in the horizontal plane and 180° in the vertical plane.

### History and Status

The American Woodcock is fairly numerous, but its camouflage, habitat and behavior make it difficult to detect with standardized surveys like the North American Breeding Bird Survey or Christmas Bird Count. The estimated population is 5 million, but data suggest that the population has fallen by an average of 1.1% per year since the 1960s (Kelley et al., 2008). The species was listed on the 2014 State of the Birds Watch List. The American Woodcock is one of the only shorebirds that is still hunted, although the yearly harvest of woodcock has declined from about 1.5 million in the 1970s to only 300,000 in the 2010s; hunting has not been shown to affect the average population numbers. Recent declines are more likely related to a combination of habitat loss from development and natural forest succession. After many family farms were abandoned in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century as people

*Well-camouflaged and nocturnal, the American Woodcock is difficult for most people to spot.*

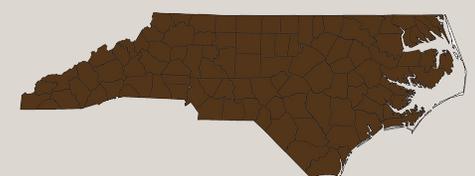


American Woodcock (Fyn Kynd through Creative Commons license)

### Range and Distribution

American Woodcock are found in eastern North America. They are present in North Carolina year-round, and can be found throughout most of the state. In the coastal plain, they are permanent resident with migratory movements; fairly common in areas with suitable habitat. They are also a permanent resident in the piedmont but are more common during winter. In the mountains they are largely a summer resident and scarce in the winter, and they are uncommon in the region.

### Range Map



■ American Woodcock Range Map

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moved to urban centers, pastures and cropland grew up into brushy areas and young forest (also called 'early successional'), woodcock flourished and populations were high. More recently, those same areas have grown up to become older forests or been covered with buildings, neither of which provides suitable habitat for the bird. Since the population has fallen over the last 50 years, conservationists are working to reverse that trend by creating more young forest habitat. Creating young forest for woodcock helps many other species of wildlife that also require early successional habitat.

### Habitats & Habits

American Woodcock require moist forested areas, open fields, early successional forest areas, and open stream or swamp areas with thickets. They typically gravitate toward young, second-growth hardwoods, but young conifer cover can suffice as well. The moist forest areas are necessary for feeding and nesting, while clearings and fields, often with scattered brush, are used for courtship displays. On the forest floor, woodcock [probe for earthworms while rocking back and forth as they walk](#), shifting their weight from one foot to the other. They probe the soil with their flexible bills to eat earthworms and other invertebrates. It looks like they are dancing, but this rocking motion is thought to move worms around in the soil to make them easier to grab. Woodcock are mostly solitary birds, but they will occasionally form small groups of two to four individuals. Male American Woodcocks perform a dazzling courtship display, dancing at both dawn and dusk. They begin with a nasal call, that it is a [buzzy peent sound](#), and then launch into the sky for a twisting display of flight. After the *peent* calls, the male makes a wide spiral while flying upward and twitters his wings as he gets higher. Around 200-300 feet in the air, he starts to descend in a zigzag pattern while chirping and will finish by landing silently near a female. After landing, he will resume *peenting* and start the whole dance over again.

Once the aerial display results in successful mating, the female lays the eggs in a shallow depression that she scrapes in the leaf litter. These nests are usually in young woodlands among stands of saplings. Males mate with multiple females and do not provide any parental care. If the nest is disturbed in the early stages of incubation, the female will likely abandon the nest.

### Human Interactions

American Woodcock migrate at night, so they are often victims of collisions with windows, communications towers and other structures. Historically, some conservationists were worried about the impact of hunting on woodcock populations, but many fewer are being hunted as time goes on. The encroachment of human development and resulting loss of habitat pose a great threat to the species. It is hoped management programs that create young forest / early successional habitat can help restore woodcock populations.

#### References

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### Wild Facts

#### Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Charadriiformes

#### Average Size

Adults are 10-12 inches and weigh about 5-8 ounces. Females are slightly larger and heavier than males.

#### Food

Most of the diet consists of earthworms. Other invertebrates found in the soil including snails, millipedes, spiders, flies, beetles and ants will also be eaten. Due to a quick digestive system, an adult woodcock can eat its weight in worms each day.

#### Breeding/Young

Clutch size is 1 to 5 eggs. Eggs hatch from early April to mid-June, usually peaking by May. Brooding only lasts until the nestlings dry off, and they all leave the nest together with the mother only a few hours after hatching. Upon hatching, the nestlings learn to "freeze" in response to threats or alarm calls. The mother will feed the young for about a week, but she begins teaching them to probe the ground for food at 3-4 days. The young can fly short distances after 2 weeks and become independent around 4-6 weeks.

#### Life Expectancy

Around 2 years, but banded individuals up to 11 years old have been recorded.



American Woodcock chick (Troy Nemitz)

#### Credits

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