

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Species Notes: Woodcock

Listen for the Timber-doodler



After reading the field trip descriptions you are probably wondering why on earth a sane person would venture out on a cold, probably damp, February night to see a bird. Especially for a bird you have probably never heard of. Well, the American Woodcock is not your every day, run of the mill bird. It is as unusual bird as its nickname, timber-doodler, indicates.

First, it's an odd looking bird. It is a plump, squat bird about the size of a quail (10" - 12") with very short legs, no neck and a very, very long bill. Looking at its picture one can't help wondering how the bird gets around with such a humongous bill. It also has very large eyes which are set high and back on its head. The position of the eyes makes it possible for the bird to see a predator above while it has its bill stuck in the ground looking for food. In fact the position of the eyes provide nearly a 360° panoramic view of the world while it is probing for its favorite food - earthworms.

While we are on the subject of food, the woodcock has been known to eat an equivalent of its own body weight in earthworms in one day. That's a lot of earthworms to find in 24 hours. But the woodcock has a few tricks up its wings. Its huge bill has a flexible upper mandible which can open at the tip to grab the food. The bill also has a sensitive tip which can 'feel' the earthworms. When all else fails the woodcock will stamp its feet to scare the worms into moving.

Since the woodcock loves earthworms, it makes sense that its primary habitat is moist woodlands. They prefer their woodlands to be adjacent to a moist field. They need this field to perform its unusual courtship display. That is what people brave the elements to see. Usually at dusk, starting as early as the beginning of January, the male woodcock will launch itself into an amazing aerial display to attract a mate. He will leap from the ground and ascend in a ever widening spiral up to 300 feet in



the air. Then he will begin a side-slipping, swooping descent which zigzags down like a falling leaf. As the bird is executing this visual display its especially designed outer wing tips emit a series of twitters, whistles and whirls that ends abruptly when the bird lands. This a very slow courtship dance with speeds as slow as 5 mph. All this to attract at mate.

The other way to see the bird is to be lucky enough to flush one from its resting spot. They are superbly camouflaged and sit so tight that you will practically step on them before they will fly. When that happens it usually gives you a heart attack!

I don't know how successful the birds are at attracting a mate but they sure can attract a crowd of birders. Hopefully, you'll be one of them.

