

**First Place Writing – Age 14-18**  
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**The Woodcocks**

In the quiet fields of eastern Long Island, New York, there is a secret that only a birder would know about. In a certain month, on certain days, at a certain time, a certain cryptic species of bird suddenly makes itself very apparent.

The certain bird is the American Woodcock. These big sandpipers of the uplands are unlikely in appearance, with excellent camouflaged patterning, a super long beak, and bulging eyes. Although superficially strange, they use their features for impressive nocturnal movement. The long beak is used like a dowitcher's, probing into the soil, except for earthworms instead of mudflat dwellers. Obviously just poking a long bill into the ground hoping to hit a worm is not too reliable a way to find a meal. Dowitchers can easily and safely relocate their bill to a new spot into the mud, but there are many treacherous pebbles and roots in a woodcocks feeding area. So what the woodcocks do is they stamp an area of soil to frighten worms, make them move, and thus betray their presence before stabbing the woodcock's beak into the soil. An ingenious and little-known adaptation!

Found throughout the eastern U.S., these birds are partial to certain habitats that vary with the seasons. In winter and migration they feed in damp woods by day, then prefer to spend the night in fields. By March, this species has already settled down and breeding in the southern states, but they're still arriving up north or courting. This species can be found in typical second-growth woods, bogs, or in dry fields where they will begin breeding. In one of these dry fields on Long Island, a local Audubon chapter was hosting walks for a week in mid March. I could only attend on one of the seven days. And I did.

I met with the friendly walk leaders by the road of a quiet field near sunset. We set up our watch just a few yards from the road, yet far enough so that no cars could be heard. We were all equipped with flashlights, and the plan was to spotlight a bird if it were to land in our clearing so display. Others from the group went scouting ahead. Within a few minutes the dusk chorus began, mostly with the newly arrived Red-winged Blackbird, along with Song Sparrows and Northern Cardinals. We waited.

About twenty minutes later the chorus died away and the sun fell below the distant horizon, and for one short minute, all was silent.

*Beep.*

As if on a cue, the first American Woodcock began calling somewhere off to the right. The excitement in the air battled with the cold, both making me shiver. The bird called again. Within minutes a chunky woodcock flew right over us, its wings a blur in the fading light. Since it flew right over my head, I wasn't able to obtain views of its long

beak. Then another bird began 'beeping' off to the left as the first one continued. The second bird 'beeped' about five times, two or three times a minute, then it flew.

The bird rose skyward, making a twittering noise as it went. The bird made a large loop 200 or 300 feet over the clearing, eventually vanishing into the sunset, then silently returned to its original location. Although the twittering of other woodcocks nearby could be heard, our male was the only one easily visible. This happened again a few times. Then two birds, probably females, flew in the direction of the visible male, right in front of our eyes. Then after doing his aerial displays, the male would return with a new array of calls that sounded like excited twittering, probably while mating and doing the ground display. When he was finished, he'd beep every twenty to thirty seconds, then after beeping five or six times, explode into the air to do the display again. Although nobody is sure why the woodcocks picked this time of day to display, it is assumed that this area between day and night is a brief window when the aerial raptors of the day have already settled in for the night and the owls of the night haven't begun hunting, so the sky is safe for a high-altitude display. Some birds like the Horned Lark hardly have to worry about day raptors, because the larks that call sandy beaches home only have to worry about low-flying Northern Harriers for most of the year.

Although very infrequently seen, and probably unknown to people outside the birding community, the American Woodcock is surprisingly the most abundant species of shorebird in North America, with an estimated five *million* individuals! It even outnumbers such abundant shorebirds like Semipalmated and Western Sandpipers, which have around three and a half million individuals each! The American isn't the only woodcock species though, the Eurasian Woodcock is widespread across Europe and Russia, and four other woodcock species can be found in eastern Asia. Although all woodcocks measure within 3 inches of each other, the largest species overall was the Obi Woodcock which was last reported in 1902. Only five specimens of this distinctive woodcock were collected, all from two islands in the Moluccan chain, near New Guinea. The smallest is the American, which currently is the only woodcock in all of the Americas. Formerly the Eurasian Woodcock was a very rare but regular visitor to the New World, during its population boom in the 1800s, but it hasn't been seen with such regularity since then. Only twice has it been confirmed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – both times in winter in New Jersey!

But until the Eurasian have another population boom, only the American Woodcocks will be heard beeping in dark, cold fields across the United States.

#### Literature Cited:

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