

South Jersey Woodcock

How About A Different Look At An Old Friend?

Think you know woodcock, the storied little prince of New England upland birds, a denizen of classic hillside covers in the Northeast?

Fuhgedaboutit, as my fellow New Jerseyans might say. We know the enigmatic woodcock is really our bird, happily at home in the scraggly cut-over oak and pine forests and boggy wetland edges that dominate Jersey's flat and sandy outer coastal plain.

Why is that?

Take out a map showing the Maritime Provinces of Canada and the northeastern United States. Put your finger on New Brunswick and trace down the coast toward Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts and Connecticut. Hop across or around the gauntlet created by metropolitan New York City and you find your finger sliding down through southern New Jersey. Toward the shank end of the state there's a triangular peninsula running roughly from Marmora, Cape May County, on the east to Salem City in Salem County on the west. The Delaware Bay pinches the peninsula from the west while the Atlantic Ocean squeezes it from the east, creating a narrowing funnel ending at Cape May Point.

The flight across the bay from the point to the nearest landfall in Delaware is seventeen miles as the woodcock flies. That explains why woodcock passing southward through New Jersey tend to sit tight, rest, eat and wait for favorable winds before taking flight.

It also translates into lots of woodcock on the ground: Every woodcock that passes through New England is likely to end up in southern New Jersey, according to Mike Haramis, a



wildlife biologist with the United States Geological Survey's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center.

That's not just an educated guess by Haramis: Every New England woodcock he and his associates have fitted with a radio transmitter tracked through New Jersey. His work validates what many hunters already knew: The Cape May peninsula creates a migration logjam that sometimes translates into phenomenal flights.

And while Haramis is certain about some aspects of woodcock migration, he's still unsure about many details of the little russet fellow's secretive movements.

The scientist knows the birds come south to New Jersey in concentrated waves, traveling in sporadic hop-skip-and-jump flights that are influenced by weather fronts; he's tracked birds up to 600 miles away as they made their way from northern Maine to southern New Jersey in fewer than ten days. Haramis also knows the availability

of good habitat, available food and the presence — or absence — of drought conditions also influence woodcock movement.

"Nobody knows any specifics about woodcock migration," Haramis says without false modesty, even though he's one of the country's few woodcock experts.

There's a reason so little is known about woodcock: The solitary buff-colored birds are inconspicuous and difficult to count.

Also — and perhaps more important — woodcock have relatively few dedicated advocates. For instance, fewer than 3,000 of New Jersey's hunters primarily seek woodcock while afield, despite sometimes stunning concentrations of birds.

BY KEVIN C. SHELLY

(I've had late-season days when as many as three birds got up at a flush and my springer even kicked up woodcock along the blustery bayshore amid sand dunes and myrtle. A few days later? Not one bird.)

As a result of having few hardcore advocates, there's little political incentive to spend money on research or management of woodcock and their fast-shrinking habitat. A lack of cachet is an old problem for the Rodney Dangerfield of woodland gamebirds.

As William G. Sheldon wrote in *The Book of the American Woodcock*: "The inconspicuous woodcock is a neglected stepchild of wildlife management. Most of the state game administrators consider it a game bird of minor importance. Today less than one percent of the funds spent on research on such game as waterfowl is expended to study woodcock. It is a difficult species to study and should present a challenge to biologists and administrators. To manage this bird in a responsible way, more funds and manpower are required."

Sheldon's prescient words were published in 1966. If anything, relatively less time, less effort and less money are spent today researching and managing woodcock. For instance, New Jersey conducted extensive trap and band operations in the Cape May region for decades; that has not happened during the last twenty years as development swallowed the farms and scrublands where the birds once roosted, and the will to carry on the work faded.

Lee Widjeskog, regional superintendent of New Jersey's Bureau of Land Management for the Division of Fish and Wildlife, would like to manage the tens of thousands of acres under his jurisdiction in southern New Jersey to benefit woodcock, cutting timber from swamps and low edges and employing controlled burns where logging isn't feasible. That isn't likely to happen without additional support — and lobbying — from sportsmen, he says.

"What we've done is acquire the land that is suitable habitat, but then we've managed it by benign neglect. We have no malice toward woodcock, but we haven't done much for them, either. We provide a fair amount of habitat, but we've never gone to the next level," said Widjeskog.

Laurie Pettigrew, the principal biologist for the state's BLM, had a ready answer when I asked why there is no management of habitat for woodcock in New Jersey: "There's no one here to push it."

"We have no Ruffed Grouse Society chapter here," she explained last spring while we were afield together surveying a Quail Unlimited habitat project — developed by the state in cooperation with a southern New Jersey chapter of QU.

Actually, there was a fledgling Cape May chapter of RGS

for a few years about 15 years ago, but the society's then-leadership prematurely clipped the chapter's wings, contending it had not raised enough banquet money; I belonged to the defunct chapter and I remain friendly with its two former presidents. There is also a fairly new RGS chapter up the coast in central New Jersey, but they've directed their conservation efforts toward grouse, a marginal species in the southern end of the state: I've seen just two grouse in nearly two decades here.

With new leadership at the society and questions raised about the organization's commitment toward protecting this vital woodcock migration route during the reporting of this story, RGS is now taking initial steps toward reestablishing a presence in the Cape May region.

A few days after I first contacted him, Robert L. Patterson Jr., the society's new executive director, had the mid-Atlantic RGS biologist invite the manager of Cape May National

Wildlife Refuge to planning meetings with other regional stakeholders and conservation groups. The refuge, already 10,500 acres with an additional 6,000 acres targeted for purchase, was established in 1989 largely to protect woodcock habitat in the fast-growing lower Cape May area. Underfunded and understaffed like most federal refuges, Cape May NWR has not developed a management plan for woodcock even though that was identified as a major goal 16 years ago.

Patterson, who for years vacationed in coastal Cape May County, is acutely aware of intense development pressure in the area's shore region and the peninsula's significance for wood-

cock migration. He sounded earnestly apologetic about the vacuum left when past RGS leadership killed the Cape chapter. Patterson has also pledged to take a more nourishing stance with developing new chapters than his predecessors, nursing them into health, rather than pruning them before they've had a chance to develop. Prodded by Patterson, RGS's regional biologist is planning his first extensive visit to Cape May.

"There's no reason why we shouldn't be there. It is very important to create a huge portion of this land as a resting area. We recognize the woodcock's plight. We have not abandoned woodcock, but we haven't done a good job telling what we've done for woodcock," said Patterson.

Shortly after I first called, Patterson began laying the groundwork for establishing a revived chapter in the region by seeking support and insights from interested local sportsmen.

Steve Del Rossi is the south Jersey woodcock enthusiast Patterson called on first, and no wonder: He is New Jersey's only professional woodcock guide, a noted Brittany breeder and trainer, and a past president of the defunct Cape May RGS chapter. (Reach Del Rossi at Quail Hollow Kennels, 104 Quinton Marlboro Road, Salem, NJ 08079 (856) 935-3459

Recommended Reading

Woodcock by John Knight. 1944. Knopf

The Book of the American Woodcock by William G. Sheldon. 1966. University of Massachusetts Press

The Woodcock Book. edited by George Bird Evans. 1977. Amwell Press

Timberdoodle! by Frank Woolner. 1987. Nick Lyons Books

Making Game by Guy de la Valdene. 1990. Clark City Press