

# BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

## American Woodcock

POST #22—March 24, 2022

Our feature species today goes by a number of different names: timberdoodle, bog sucker, hokumpoke, Labrador twister, mud snipe, bog snipe, brush snipe, night partridge, big-eye, or mud-bat. No matter where you are or what you call it, American Woodcock are amazing birds!

Woodcocks are a primarily Eurasian and Southeast Asian family of birds, with American Woodcock being the smallest and only North American member of the family. All woodcocks are shorebirds and spend most of their time in upland areas. At home in deciduous and mixed woodlands, swamps, bogs, and a variety of wetland habitats, American Woodcock are a stout and cryptic species active primarily at night.

An odd looking species, American Woodcock have long bills and rather large, highly positioned eyes. Like many long-billed shorebirds, woodcocks probe the soil looking for worms and other invertebrates. The coolest thing about their bills is that they can open when closed! They have the ability to open just the tip of

their bill while the length of their bill remains closed, which helps capture prey without ingesting a lot of soil. With their constant probing, their large and highly positioned eyes evolved to give them nearly panoramic vision of their environment to help spot potential predators, even in the dark.

Their breeding behavior is a highly sought after experience by new and well-seasoned birders alike! American Woodcock are beginning to arrive to the Sax-Zim Bog in late March and are considered an important sign of spring to many. Males choose a display site, typically a bare and open patch of ground and begin calling. Their "peenting" calls go on for a couple of minutes and then the male flies straight (up to 100m!) into the air above the display site. "Twittering" then begins as the bird opens its wings and slowly circles back to the ground. The sound made during this descent is made by the narrow outer primary feathers.

If you would like to experience this behavior, good news! It is quite predictable!

First, find a suitable site, such as an open field or forest clearing. Next, arrive just before dark. Aldo Leopold notes in "A Sand County Almanac" that American Woodcock begin to display at precisely .05 foot candles (around 5 lumens) of light! Finally, enjoy the many sounds of this bird! They continue to display until it gets too dark and will resume when the light conditions improve at dawn. In our area, woodcocks are common and begin to display when they arrive in late March and will continue into June.

American woodcock are a species that receives a lot of attention, both because they are a popular game species and in some regions are declining. A unique conservation issue for this species is window strikes. American Woodcocks have the unfortunate distinction of being a "super collider." Super colliders are bird species that are more prone to window strikes or strike windows at higher rates than similar species (for example Red-eyed Vireo). Woodcocks migrate at low elevation, making them susceptible to window strikes or collisions with buildings.

However, there is some good news regarding this species conservation in Minnesota. The Natural Resources Research Institute is doing some great work on this species, tracking young birds and hoping to help improve land management practices to support this species, as well as Veery and Golden-winged Warbler.

More information is included in the photos below!

(Photos by Sparky Stensaas)



American Woodcock are a beautiful bird! Peachy-cream colors offset gray and brown to make this bird very hard to see on the forest floor. They have very short legs and tails and broad, rounded wings.



This handsome male American Woodcock has chosen a gravel road and the open ditch berm beside it as his display site. Male American woodcock may use a number of different sites in an evening. This one is right in the middle of giving a sharp "peent!"



If you are lucky, you can catch a woodcock in the low dusk light taking off from the ground. Once a woodcock leaves the ground and begins "twittering" it will usually land close to its point of take off.



If you are especially lucky you might come across a nest! American Woodcocks nest on the ground, in small depressions often tucked out of sight. This nest was very near the Welcome Center, but unfortunately failed.