Sportsmen and birders alike marvel at the American woodcock, a.k.a. sky dancer, little lover of swamps or timberdoodle.

A Bird of Many Names

Story By Deck Major

The American woodcock is a bird of the eastern forests of the United States and Canada. Its range extends westward through the eastern half of most of the plains states and a small part of eastern and gulf Texas.

Woodcock are rotund, little birds with mottled, brown, tan and blue coloration that blends perfectly with forest leaf patterns. They have short, rounded wings for strong, but short, flights in dense cover. Their eyes are wide and set back on their heads, providing for a wide viewing angle that aids in both land and aerial predator detection. Females are slightly larger than males but neither sex weighs more than 0.5 pounds.

The literal translation of the woodcock's scientific name, *Philohela minor*, is "little lover of swamps or bogs." Its common name in many parts of the state is "timberdoodle," which comes from its long, specialized bill used to catch earthworms. Depending upon time of year and local site characteristics, 50-90 percent of a woodcock's diet is earthworms.

Most often, woodcock are not far from moist, fertile soil. With their extra-long, 2.5-inch bill (female's bills are slightly longer), they probe the soil for food. The bird feeds by raising the upper portion of the tip of its bill as it probes. When it encounters a food item, it eases the tip around an unlucky worm or invertebrate, then snaps its bill shut and gingerly pulls its prize to daylight. These little guys can eat almost two ounces of worms per day. In terms of numbers, this translates roughly to five juicy nightcrawlers and about 40 smaller, garden-variety worms.

Wide-set eyes and a long bill used to probe earthworms from the soil aid in the identification of the American woodcock.

Woodcock spend their summers in northern New England and upper Midwest states and Canada and they winter primarily along the Gulf coast states from South Carolina to eastern Texas. Illinois then, is a mid-migration state. However, several woodcock do breed and nest in Illinois each spring.

(Photo by Deck Major.)

A woodcock's mottled coloration helps it blend into the vegetation on the forest floor.

The male's courtships display is a special show. Aldo Leopold, in his classic book, "A Sand County Almanac," called the display a "sky dance." Woodcock begin showing up in Illinois during spring in mid-February (hardly spring weather to a hummingbird or swallow) and courtship displays begin immediately. In fact, birds have been observed singing in 15-degree Fahrenheit temperatures in areas with patches of deep snow.

Males pick a spot in an open area or brushy field, referred to as a singing ground, for this courtship ritual. Often, singing grounds are a recent forest clearcut, a power line right-of-way through a forest, an abandoned pasture or old field adjacent to forested land.

Males fly to their singing ground just before dusk each night. To woo a female, the male stands on the ground and rotates, making a vocalization called a "peent" every few seconds for about 3-4 minutes. Then he takes off into the wind, flying upward and almost out of sight. As he rises, air rushing through his wings makes a whistling sound. At the top of his flight, it often appears as though he flies a rough figure-eight before descending. As he drops, another warble-like whistling vocalization is made. Unbelievably, he lands within feet of his take-off spot and soon begins peenting again. This courtship display usually lasts for 30-60 minutes each evening, but it can go on all night during full-moon situations.

(Photo by Jeff Nadler, Jeff Nadler Photography.)

Illinois woodcock don't waste any time and begin nesting in March. Usually, hens pick the edges of young, second-growth woodlands that are usually 10-15 feet high, or abandoned fields with annual weeds and no overhead woody cover. Males share no responsibility during nesting or brood rearing.

Hens usually make a shallow depression on the forest floor for a nest and may line it with a few leaves. Four eggs is the normal clutch size and eggs hatch in about 20 days. Hens produce a single brood each year, but will re-nest if a first attempt is unsuccessful.

The precocial young woodcock leave the nest, never to return, soon after hatching. The main diet of hatchlings is earthworms and other invertebrates and insects. In about two weeks, they are flight capable.

(Photo by Deck Major.)

Bird in Trouble

Many hunters and birders alike have watched their favorite woodcock coverts come and go. Woodcock do not use mature forests; they need young "shrubby" blocks of timber. These areas are called early-successional forest stands. The life of a woodcock covert is relatively short then at best, often no more than 20 years.

Long ago, the natural disturbances made by very hot fires killed trees and thus created forest openings and early-successional timber. As farms were abandoned throughout much of the upper Midwest, shrublands and woodcock habitat also was created. However, much of this land has been allowed to mature and is no longer preferred by woodcock. Even beavers created forest openings when they deserted their well-engineered ponds and the dams eventually broke.

Now, Mother Nature creates early successional timber through natural disasters such as tornadoes, ice storms and hurricanes. However storms rarely occur where desired or planned. The best way to create early successional timber where it can be utilized by breeding and migrating birds is to use silvicultural (forestry) methods.

Timber harvests using professional forest methods of even-aged manage-

Woodcocks begin nesting as early as March, producing a single nest containing an average of four eggs.

ment can be used effectively to create quality woodcock habitat. Two different methods of even-aged management are best. The first is called a shelterwood cut. Usually, removal of trees occurs in two stages. The first stage involves cutting trees for regeneration and the next cut(s) involve removing competition from remaining desirable trees.

The other even-aged management method is called a clearcut where all trees are removed. When used in small stands of 5-20 acres, excellent herbaceous groundcover and subsequent young forest sapling habitat is created when the forest canopy is either opened or removed using these harvest methods.

In 1998, Illinois hunters averaged 4.9 days afield in pursuit of woodcock and averaged less than two birds per hunter per season. Most hunters reported that this was a "bonus" bird, taken while pursuing either bobwhite quail or other more popular upland game. Since 1997, the woodcock season in the Midwest has been 45 days with a daily bag limit of three. Two-thirds of Illinois woodcock hunters reported that they usually, or always, used a dog.

(Photo by Adele Hoodes.)

white-eyed vireo

(Photos by John K. Cassady.)

brown thrasher

black-and-white warbler

The herbaceous groundcover and subsequent developing thick stand of forest seedlings/saplings creates important habitat (called stem density) for other forest wildlife besides American woodcock. These areas are far from "biological deserts." Wildlife researchers have discovered a long list of species that benefit when early forest succession vegetation is created, including white-tailed deer, ruffed grouse, wild turkey, indigo bunting, prairie warbler, blue-winged warbler, chestnut-sided warbler, yellow-breasted chat, white-eyed vireo, blue-gray gnatcatcher, rufous-sided towhee, northern cardinal, brown thrasher, great-crested flycatcher and the black-and-white warbler.

Unfortunately, timber harvest on public land is unpopular and has often been halted by well meaning but misguided litigation. Authors of the 2008 "American Conservation Plan, a Summary of and Recommendations for Woodcock Conservation in North America" state that, "loss and degradation of early successional forest habitat is believed to be the primary factor responsible for these declines (1.8 percent decline per year in singing routes in the Central Region since the mid-1960s)." They further state "changes in land use and societal attitudes towards even-aged forest management practices (i.e. clearcutting) that create early successional habitat will likely contribute to continual declines in woodcock populations." The plan specifically identifies that Illinois needs to create 12,140 acres of this habitat annually in order to stabilize current habitat declines.

Woodcock have very specific food and cover requirements: clearings of scattered grass or annual weeds for courtship; young dense forests for nesting/brood rearing; young forests with areas of fertile, moist soil composition for feeding; and, large fields (more than 3 acres) of scattered grass or annual weeds for roosting. Providing all stages of growth in our Illinois forests creates habitat for wildlife species that need early successional forests, such as the timberdoodle.

If you would like to improve your property for woodcock, consider contacting your district wildlife biologist. Often, as you profit from wood products through either sawlogs or firewood production, a welcome bi-product of your effort is the creation of needed early successional forest habitat for a wide variety of wildlife species.

The best friend of the American woodcock may very well be a logging truck.

Early successional forests provide suitable habitat for woodcock and a diversity of other wildlife, including deer, turkey and several species of songbirds.

Deck Major is the DNR Region III/IV Wildlife Biologist based in the Alton office. He may be reached at (618) 462-1181 ext. 144 or deck.major@illinois.gov.