



Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

American Woodcock *Scolopax minor*

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The American Woodcock is a unique, compact bird weighing between 116 and 219 grams. On average, females are larger than males. Males and females are similar in appearance. The plumage is mottled with brown, buff, and gray to camouflage against the forest floor. A long bill measuring 5.9 to 7.8 cm is used to probe for earthworms. The head has three dark transverse bars on the crown and large eyes that are set toward the back of the head. Woodcock perform a unique courtship display in the spring on most evenings around sunset (also sometimes at dawn) that involves the male strutting and walking while “peenting” on the ground followed by an elaborate aerial display. The process is then repeated.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: The American Woodcock is a migratory game bird found throughout the state from early spring through fall. They breed in all counties of Massachusetts. The abundance of woodcock in Massachusetts has changed greatly over time as a result of widespread changes in land use. Annual woodcock singing ground surveys conducted throughout the Atlantic Flyway have showed a long-term decline since those surveys began in 1968; however, over approximately the past 10 years, woodcock populations have been stable. Woodcock typically arrive in Massachusetts by mid-March and breed from then through late May. They begin their fall migration south from Canada during late September and travel through Massachusetts during mid-October to mid-November. Woodcock from Massachusetts typically winter in the southeastern United States on the Atlantic and Gulf coastal plains.

HABITAT DESCRIPTION: Old abandoned farms and orchards reverting to forest generally provide optimum habitat for American Woodcock. Singing grounds and roost sites are characteristically located in larger forest openings (about 5 acres), old pastures, brushy fields, or bogs. Nests are generally found close by in young forest woodlands or brushy cover. Daytime feeding habitat includes areas with poorly drained soils such as alder



Photo by Bill Byrne

swales near old fields, or second-growth hardwoods mixed with aspen, birch and alder, with rich, moist soils near ponds, streams, or wet areas. More importantly, these habitats must exist in relative close proximity for optimal reproductive success and survival. Ideally, these habitats are immediately adjacent.

THREATS: American Woodcock populations have been declining due to loss of suitable habitat to forest succession and development. Encouraging small clearcuts during timber operations and maintaining early successional areas adjacent to wetlands is the best approach to maintaining and potentially increasing woodcock populations statewide. Most current timber harvesting operations in Massachusetts are of low intensity and subsequently do not create suitable early successional habitat for woodcock and other associated species. Population numbers can also be seriously impacted by severe storms and other climatic events during migration and nesting periods. Predation also affects woodcock, particularly in marginal habitats that are impacted by development where meso-predator density (e.g., domestic cats, skunk, raccoon, opossum, fisher) is artificially elevated. Consequently, woodcock in these environments may represent sink populations.

Updated 2015

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

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