



Woodlands *for* Wildlife

Volume 53 Spring 2020

A newsletter of Vermont Coverts: Woodlands for Wildlife, Inc.

FACTS AND FEATURES: AMERICAN WOODCOCK

Lisa Sausville, *Executive Director*



Photo by Amber Roth

I know spring has arrived when I hear the peenting sound of the timber doodle. A what you ask? The harbinger of spring. A small, stocky, migratory shorebird, the American woodcock (*Scolopax minor*). You won't find this shorebird by the shore. It has adapted to live in upland forested habitats.

Woodcock sing and display upon their return in March in my back field. I get excited and make the whole family come out to listen and watch. Males arrive in mid-March

MISSION Enlist Vermont landowners in a long-term commitment to maintain and enhance diverse wildlife habitat and healthy ecosystems.



and set up territories followed by the female. They are generally gone by mid-November.

Mostly, these birds are secretive, spending their time probing the forest floor for worms and other soil invertebrates. But, in the spring they take to the skies.

After emitting a series of buzzy peent calls the male will fly in an upward spiral to about 300 feet. As they obtain height their wings start to twitter. They descend quickly in a zig zag pattern until they reach the ground. Then the display is repeated.

Woodcock are curious birds, about the size of a robin that bobs when it walks. If you haven't seen it, check out a video online.

They have a stocky body, brown and tan camouflaged feathers with dark barring on their heads, and a long prehensile bill. A what you ask? A bill where the tip of the upper part, or mandible, can be opened while underground. It is used to probe moist soils for earthworms, the woodcock's primary food.

Male woodcock may mate with several females. They take no part in nest selection or the rearing of the young. The nest, usually in young upland woods, is nothing more than a shallow depression in the ground among the leaf litter.

The female lays a clutch of 4 eggs, 1 each day, over a period of a

few days. After the last egg is laid, incubation begins. The eggs hatch after about 20 days with the peak hatch occurring in mid-May.

The chicks are precocial and can leave the nest once dry, ready to search for food. They grow rapidly and are the size of an adult in about four weeks. Somewhere between six to eight weeks the young will fledge.

These acrobats of the sky are facing declining numbers. This downturn is attributed to forest maturation and urban development.

Woodcock favor early successional habitats. However, they do need a variety of habitats to meet all their life requirements. Habitat needs while in Vermont include sites for courtship, feeding, nesting and roosting.

The birds favor small clearings such as abandoned fields or forest openings for courtship and summer roosts, dense shrubland or young thickets for feeding, and early successional forests for nesting and brood rearing. They are often found adjacent or within moist soil sites or wetlands.

Woodcock do best where this mosaic of habitat is a combination of dense hardwood cover interspersed with both large and small openings. An ideal mix is generally found with a combination of farmland and hardwood forest.

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NOTE FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Rich Chalmers, *Class of 2005 Spring*



All of our lives this spring have been disrupted by Covid-19. For some it is life threatening and for almost all a cause of angst for friends and loved ones. It affects our jobs, our families, and how we gather socially. As we learn to navigate this new world, think

of your woods as a place of solace and learning.

For Ann and I this involves long-term forest bird monitoring and soaking up as much information about amphibians as we possibly can. It also includes evening walks with the horses to hear the three male woodcocks do their thing in nearby but separate fields.

Our land is blessed with a healthy woodcock population now, but it wasn't always that way. In fact, we joined our first citizen science project, a program monitoring woodcock breeding populations for VT Fish & Wildlife, because we were so interested in these birds but had to search out ways to hear them.

This is particularly interesting because stories from people who lived on this land in the sixties, when the forest was much younger, told of woodcock so prevalent that they were taken for granted.

A Coverts workshop in Groton, to explore patch cuts on state forest land designed to enhance woodcock populations helped us grasp the diverse habitat needs of this upland shorebird.

Back home, we harvested part of a white pine plantation near the house and as a result created some excellent early successional habitat. Not only has this provided a home for Song Sparrows, Chestnut Sided Warblers and White Throated Sparrows within earshot of the house, but it created excellent woodcock habitat as well.

Over time, the woodcock populations near the house have grown. It is now common to hear them just outside the door in spring and see them flying overhead throughout the summer and fall. On one occasion I almost stepped on an invisible brood of chicks and on another I had to stop and wait while mom and chicks crossed the trail ahead.

It is rewarding and exciting to see the population rebound so successfully. Create the habitat, and they will come.

I urge each of you to go out, sit, watch and listen. Explore those places you have not been out in much, check for amphibians, learn some more bird calls, set out a game camera. Think about how habitat affects who lives where and how you can make a difference in supporting those creatures who use your woods as

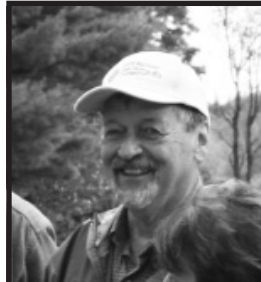
their home. Think about what the land means to you and what it means to have a land ethic. It's a chance to gain peace and strength from nature around us.

Coverts is here to help. We are working hard to provide you with opportunities to learn and explore. Check the E-news and the website calendar for the latest on-line programs. Follow us on Facebook and Instagram.

I am sure you will find something of interest. There is lots to do and learn while we isolate together.

Rich Chalmers

Rich Chalmers
Council President



CONGRATULATIONS ALLEN YALE

Cooperator Allen Yale, Class of 1986, has been awarded the 7th annual George Buzzell Forest Stewardship Award from the Northwoods Stewardship Center.

The award is given to a person in the Northeast Kingdom who has made a significant contribution to sustainable forestry and education.

Allen is a long-time Coverts Cooperator, served on the Coverts Council and is an active member of the environmental community. He has hosted many workshops for VT Coverts, Vermont Woodlands Association, Tree Farm and Northwoods on his property, sharing his love and passion for Vermont's woods and wildlife. We congratulate Allen on receiving this award! Well deserved.

CONNECTING THROUGH COVERTS: NOTES FROM THE SURVEY

The survey of Coverts Cooperators is moving along. To date, we have interviewed 117 Cooperators, covering more than 20,000 acres of Vermont lands.

We are in the early stages of analysis, but we have learned a few things already. A number of Cooperators have asked for more workshops offered closer to them. People are reluctant to travel too far (not longer than an hour) to attend a workshop.

This had been on our radar and before coronavirus limitations we were working to schedule more programs. When restrictions relax, we hope to jump on this. In the meantime, we have moved some of our programming online. You can check out our evolving calendar on the Coverts web site.

As things return more to normal we will need your help with workshop topics or hosting a workshop in your area. All hosting entails is being the local coordinator helping to choose the topic and find a location. Let us

Connecting Through Coverts: Notes from the Survey *continued from page 2*

know if you would like to assist with this and we can help you make something happen close to you.

Several people are also interested in meeting other Cooperators for social events to share the Coverts comradery and encourage peer-to-peer interactions. We have started this type of get together in Addison, Windsor and Rutland counties through our Coffee Klatch – just a get together to chat. We have hosted them over morning coffee and evening drinks. We are now doing them online. Want to help spearhead one in your area? Send along an e-mail to lisa@vtcoverts.org.

And, we've heard some specific feedback about workshop topics of interest. One example is an alumni training. Watch for this in 2021. Until then, mark your calendar for the 35th celebration October 10, 2020.

Another interesting finding is that some don't feel like they've done much since the Coverts Training. Often, though, by the end of the survey conversation, they recognize that they've done much more than they had thought, whether they focused on their own land, helped their neighbors, or worked within their communities.

Part of the reason we are making these interviews over the phone, rather than simply mailing out a survey, is so that we can reconnect with people in our network. We want to remind you all that we are here to help you with your land and encourage you to work within your communities.

Perhaps now you have time to talk. If so, we would like to speak with you! Email alicia@vtcoverts.org to schedule a time. Coverts, helping you connect to the land, wildlife and each other.

Facts and Features: American Woodcock

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You may not be able to meet all of their habitat needs on one property. This is an ideal time to take that birds eye view of your property. What do you provide in terms of habitat and what might your neighbor have?

Management practices could assist in enhancing woodcock habitat and benefit a variety of other early successional species. Sites that are relatively flat with nearby moist soils might be just the place to do some enhancement. This could include cutting aspen and alder for regeneration or creating forest openings. Log landings can also serve as roosting or singing grounds for woodcock.

Nesting and brood rearing sites can occur on a drier more upland site. Reverting farm fields with scattered shrubs provide excellent habitat for woodcock hens and chicks. The goal is to create a diverse canopy structure to meet the various life requirements.

Invasive plants should be a concern when thinking of creating or enhancing woodcock habitat. These

introduced exotics can often out compete our native shrubs and grasses. It may not be possible to eradicate the invasives however landowners should work to keep them suppressed, giving our native vegetation a chance. With these measures we should be able to secure the woodcock a place on the landscape into the future.

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Photo by Amber Roth

EASTERN WOODCOCK MIGRATION RESEARCH COOPERATIVE PROJECT

Vermont will be joining the Eastern Woodcock Migration Research Cooperative (EWMRC). The EWMRC is an international collaborative interested in understanding migratory ecology for the American Woodcock. The project is coordinated by the University of Maine. They seek to understand the migration patterns between the bird's northern breeding range and southern wintering grounds and how the conditions encountered during migration might influence population declines.

The project began in 2017 in Maine when 6 woodcocks were fitted with GPS transmitters prior to their fall migration. In 2018 and 2019 they added 121 more birds captured from 9 states and 2 Canadian provinces. In the fall of 2020 Vermont will join the collaborative and is expected to outfit 16 birds with transmitters. Specific questions they hope to answer include; when woodcock initiate migration, how long it takes individuals to complete migration, survival during migration, and stopover sites where woodcock rest and refuel during migration.

For more information and to see maps indicating preliminary results visit the EWMRC website at <https://www.woodcockmigration.org/>



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Nate Billings, *Woodstock, fall*
Richard Saunders, *Milton, spring*

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Of course, a landowner should consider their goals and objectives when making any management decisions. It is not possible to manage for all species in one place. Looking at the overall landscape will help determine your best course of action. Consult with a biologist to determine the best location and strategy for improving your woodland for woodcock.

CALENDAR OF EVENTS



Due to the COVID-19 Stay-Home-Stay-Safe Order we are not currently hosting any in person workshops. We are however offering a wealth of innovative programming provided by Coverts and our many partners online. Please check the website calendar for a listing of opportunities for you to learn and connect.

**Keep Vermont Coverts growing strong!
Donate online at www.vtcoverts.org**