

[From Spring 1999]

## **Woodcock On The Shore**

With the closing of winter, the wintering population of American woodcock residing in the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge will have made their way north towards New England and southern Canada. These unique upland shorebirds arrive on the Eastern Shore Refuge in November and either pass through and continue their way down south, or winter here on the refuge through mid-February. Some of the birds are permanent residents, and will nest on the refuge during the spring. This winter season we had the opportunity to survey the local wintering population of woodcock, as well as conduct banding operations with James City County high school students.

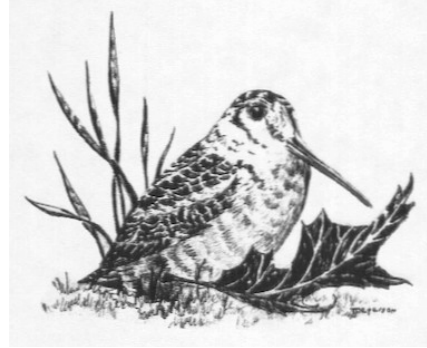
Surveys were done in the evening to count woodcock in their nocturnal habitat. During the daytime, woodcock reside in the refuge oak/pine woods surrounding our management fields. At dusk, the woodcock move into the fields, concentrating in the mowed strips, where they will roost and feed for the night. Areas on the refuge which harbor the most nocturnal woodcock activity include the east end of the main refuge management field, between the old air tower and the telephone tower. Woodcock are also active on the south side base of the old army bunker, located in the management field in front of the headquarters building. The western management field, located south of our visitor center pond, is another active site for woodcock. At dawn woodcock will leave their night-time habitat and return to their diurnal cover.

Surveys were conducted from December 28th to February 10th. The purpose of the surveys was to record the number of woodcock active on the refuge management fields. Surveys were also conducted to get an idea of the number of woodcock using the refuge as a wintering habitat. Surveys were done using an ATV vehicle to drive through the mowed management lanes. A spotlight was used to spot birds and the number seen was recorded. The total number of woodcock counted was 598, with evening counts ranging from over 200 birds seen to just 14. Woodcock activity was greatest on evenings with heavy cloud cover, little wind and above freezing temperatures. Active evenings were also rainy and balmy allowing woodcock to probe the soft muddy ground for earthworms or other terrestrial arthropods.

Field biology students from James City County public high schools came to the refuge to help in a banding project. Before going out into the field, the students were given a program covering the life history of woodcock on the eastern shore, and how to correctly capture, age, sex and band the birds. Students were then taken out into the field after dusk to capture and band woodcock. Woodcock banding was done on four separate evenings during the month of January. A total of 28 woodcock were banded, 22 of which were males and 6 females. The average weight of the male birds was 163.7 grams and the female birds averaged 195.5 grams. They were captured by the use of spotlights and long handled nets. When captured the woodcock were banded, then their bill length, wing length and weight

were taken to determine sex. The color of the feet and bill were observed, as well as the pattern of the secondary feathers, to help determine the age of the bird. All woodcock which we banded were labeled "after hatching year" (AHY) birds, which means they hatched in 1998.

The banding program was very successful with no mortalities (students or woodcock). Data were efficiently collected, and the students were very enthusiastic and excited about the whole program. Special thanks is owed Jerry Loomis and Bob Carpenter. Due to their efforts, all vehicles and equipment used for the surveys and the banding program ran and operated with no problems. In future years, we hopefully will be doing more banding and surveys to follow the movements of woodcock and see how many use the refuge. Vegetation transects will also have to be done to compare different habitat types used by the birds.



If you are in the area during late fall through late winter, stop by some time at dusk or dawn, and check out our healthy wintering population of timber doodles, mud bats, or Labrador twisters -- all known as American woodcock. These amazing birds can be seen or heard flying over head heading towards their diurnal or nocturnal habitat on the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife refuge.

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