

[From Winter 1996-97]

## Woodcock Management at ESNWR



Photo by J.A. Spindelkew

The American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) has long been a species of special concern at the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge. In the past 30 years, woodcock populations have declined substantially in the northeast, one of their major breeding grounds. Efforts, to slow and reverse this trend are currently

underway at this refuge along with the Cape May (NJ), Erie (PA), Iroquois (NY), Prime Hook (DE), Great Swamp (NJ), Moosehorn (ME), and Canaan (VW) National Wildlife Refuges. As one of the few wintering grounds for the American Woodcock, the Eastern Shore refuge is an ideal place to study the birds, since it avoids disturbing them during their breeding season.

Known affectionately by some as the "Timberdoodle," this species' numbers have been declining steadily due to the loss of early successional habitats. Most of these lands have been used for agriculture or developed for real estate. Fortunately, there is still a large area of habitat favored by the woodcock on this refuge. The woodcock need forested land in which to hide during the day and an adjacent field with soft soils to hunt for their favorite meal, earthworms, during the night.

Here at the Eastern Shore refuge, woodcock management has been taking place since 1985, with successional rotation of the fields. In a good year, more than 200 woodcock are banded as we try to learn about field preference and population size. Only about five percent of those caught are recaptures, which indicates that the wintering population on the refuge is quite large.

In 1989, a number of woodcocks were banded with radio transmitters to monitor their habitat preferences. As others had found, greenbrier and black locust were two of their favorites. It is believed that black locust is desirable because it fixes nitrogen, making the surrounding soil richer and leading to a high earthworm density.

It has also been observed that, as the weather changes, the woodcocks tend to prefer different successional growths. This is one area where more research needs to be done, since we can best serve this species if we understand its needs. As for the range of woodcocks on the Delmarva Peninsula, it was found that the lower six kilometers were the most heavily used.

Over the years, many volunteers have contributed their time to this project including local schools. On an average year 100 volunteers offer their time and concern. The public is welcome and may participate by calling ahead to the refuge office to see what nights we

will be banding. Openings depend upon space available and groups Of four to six are most easily accommodated. To arrange a visit, please call the refuge at 757-331-2760, Monday through Friday, from 8 a.m to 4 p.m. With the continued aid of volunteers and government funding, the American woodcock will likely be with us a long time.

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