

The American Woodcock
By Bill Palmer, PGC Wildlife Biologist

The American woodcock is a popular game bird, both with hunters and birdwatchers, throughout eastern North America. The total U.S harvest was 290,000 woodcock in 2007 with hunters taking 11,000 birds in Pennsylvania. Our 10,600 hunters are the most in any eastern state and we rank second, behind Maine, in number of woodcock taken.

Woodcock hunters are very dedicated to their sport and their numbers here in PA have been stable over the past decade, in contrast to a decrease for those pursuing other upland birds and small game in general. Hunters like woodcock because they are challenging to shoot, hold well for pointing dogs, and they are fine table fare. Woodcock rely on the camouflage coloration of their feathers for survival; they sit “tight” and only flush into darting flight when almost stepped on. This behavior and the woodcock’s habit of frequenting thick cover are the reasons the bird is such a challenging quarry and why hunters often enlist the help of bird dogs.

Because the woodcock is a migratory bird, the federal government has regulatory authority over its management. Woodcock are managed on the basis of Eastern and Central regions or populations. These regional boundaries conform to the boundary between the Atlantic and Mississippi waterfowl flyways. The US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) sets the season and bag frameworks for all migratory game birds, including woodcock.

Male woodcock begin their courtship display as they migrate north in the spring. They are early migrants and begin arriving in Pennsylvania in late February. A breeding male establishes a “singing ground”, which is a small opening usually free of most woody vegetation and often near dense shrubs or young forests. At dawn and dusk the male begins by giving a series of nasal sounds (*peents*) while strutting on the ground. He then flies upward in a spiral pattern for 100-300 feet, making a twittering sound with his wings. Then the bird descends back to the ground while making a chirping sound. This display is repeated a dozen times or more at the beginning and end of each day. It is this display, the skydance that makes the birds so popular for viewing during spring months.

Early studies demonstrated that counts of singing males provide indices to woodcock populations and could be used to monitor annual changes. The USFWS annually coordinates a Singing-ground Survey, developed to exploit this conspicuous courtship display, to monitor woodcock breeding populations within each state and province in the central and northern portions of the woodcock’s breeding range. Results of these surveys show a significant long-term (1968-08) woodcock population decline of 1.6 % per year in the Eastern Region and 1.4% per year in the Central Region. The historical abundance of woodcock in Pennsylvania parallels that of the Eastern Region, although our population has declined at 3.3% per year, for a total drop of 32% over this 40-year period (Figure 1).

Good news for hunters is that woodcock survival studies, including one in PA, have not shown impacts from hunting on woodcock populations beyond a local level. Biologists believe that loss of early-successional (young) forest is responsible for declines in numbers of woodcock. Woodcock can be reliably described as early

successional habitat specialists (Figure 2) and their preferred habitat is often referred to as scrub-shrub or seedling/sapling, suggesting relatively low growing, dense, woody cover. Woodcock habitats are widespread across PA. The birds may be found wherever early successional forest habitats mixed with openings on fertile soils exist. This mosaic of early successional forest habitats on suitable soils provides the habitat needs of woodcock, including breeding, migrating, and wintering birds. As urbanization continues, eliminating and fragmenting potential forest cover, and our forests become older, the amount of this early-successional habitat needed by woodcock for breeding, feeding and cover, continues to decrease. Over the past 3 decades, PA has gone from almost 22% of its forest in the younger stages to the 11% we have in early-succession today. We still have over 16 million acres of forest but we have 1.6 million fewer of those acres in the young, brushy stages of growth. This downward trend in the amount of young forests corresponds to the woodcock population trend.

About 10 years ago, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies formed a Woodcock Task Force to summarize and make recommendations for woodcock conservation in North America. The resulting 2008 AMERICAN WOODCOCK CONSERVATION PLAN, which documents changes in woodcock densities and habitat in North America that occurred from the early 1970s to present, has a goal to halt the decline of woodcock populations and return them to numbers which provide more opportunity for utilization.

Additional good news for Pennsylvanians is the recent completion of the PGC MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR AMERICAN WOODCOCK IN PENNSYLVANIA, 2008-2017. This long-range plan can be viewed on this website. The plan contains information on woodcock biology, habitat needs, populations, and recreation, both historical and present. The plan's goal is to return populations to densities that will provide improved hunting and viewing opportunities. It supports the 2008 North American Plan and using the process of that plan, knowledge of population deficits was used to determine breeding habitat objectives for PA.

Accomplishing habitat management for woodcock on a statewide basis will require not only participation by all public land managers, but development of a major private lands initiative because the majority of timberland is under private ownership. Therefore, state and federal resource agencies will need to enlist the help of individual and commercial private forestland owners in order to achieve habitat management objectives. A key part of our state plan is to develop demonstration sites throughout the state to educate both public and private landowners about managing for woodcock.

In a timely event of 2008, the Wildlife Management Institute launched the APPALACHIAN MT. WOODCOCK INITIATIVE. This initiative is part of a cooperative agreement with the Northeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife agencies to assist in implementation of the 2008 CONSERVATION PLAN in Bird Conservation (BCR) 28. Initial objectives include establishing demonstration areas on both public and private lands. By providing technical assistance, outreach and funding opportunities for woodcock and other early successional habitat species this initiative will be a great value in helping start our state plan.

Increasing woodcock populations and habitats is a significant challenge, and will require coordinated planning, research, and management efforts between state and federal agencies, flyway councils, nongovernmental organizations and sportsmen's groups.

Ruffed Grouse Society and Woodcock Limited of PA are two sportsmen's groups that will be cooperating on both the BCR 28 initiative and our state woodcock plan.