

Branching Out: Maryland's Forest Stewardship Educator

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Status of American Woodcock: Spiraling High or Steadily Falling?



Nothing stirs the soul nor stimulates the imagination like the nasal "peent" of the American Woodcock as darkness settles on a balmy spring evening. Their often transient presence reminds us that the seasons have shifted yet again and migration is underway. The woodcock, a webless migratory shore bird, actually inhabits fields and forests. It is a popular game bird throughout eastern and central North America. Hunters spend an estimated 3.4 million days annually on its pursuit and harvest an estimated 1.1 million birds annually.

The American Woodcock is affectionately named timberdoodle, Labrador twister, bogsucker, and mudsnipe. The later titles no doubt refer to the bird's feeding habits in which it uses its long bill to probe the ground for earthworms. Earthworms are high in fat and protein and are the woodcock's main food item. Insect larvae and other invertebrates are also important. Due to a quick digestive system, woodcock can eat their weight in worms every day. Woodcock feed primarily at dusk and dawn. Their large eyes are set far back on their head. This adaptation is thought to allow for 360 degree vision while probing for food. They are chunky, short-legged birds, and are well camouflaged with mottled russet or brown plumage. Woodcock are small of stature, about the size of a robin. Males and females are similar in size and appearance.

American Woodcock are known for their amazing "sky dance". This dance consists of several males gathered in an open area, each loudly "peenting" from the ground. These areas are known as the singing grounds. A male will take flight high into the sky spiraling upwards of 250 feet. While in flight, they produce chirping and twittering sounds both vocally and from the air rushing over their wing feathers. The males will then drop to the ground like a falling leaf. This sky-dance is designed to impress the females gathered on the edge of the clearing who will then select a mate.

There are actually two major woodcock populations in North America: the Eastern Region from the Appalachian Mountains east; and the Central Region from the Appalachians west to the Great Plains. Milder winters may favor the woodcock remaining in Maryland year-round. However, birds from the northern climes migrate to their southern wintering grounds of Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia and

Florida across to Texas. With the end of winter, they make their nocturnal migration north to their breeding grounds. They breed from central West Virginia and Maryland to southern Canada, Maine, and the Great Lakes region.

Short-term trends (1994 to 2004) show no significant change in American Woodcock population levels. However, woodcock have experienced declines in both the East and the Central regions since the Singing-ground survey began in 1968 (2.1% and 1.8% annually, respectively). Consequently, these declines have prompted conservation concerns. The U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan lists the American Woodcock as a Species of High Concern. This designation is based upon declining population trends, as well as habitat loss and degradation on both the breeding grounds and non-breeding grounds. While woodcock hunting seasons have been limited in both the East and the South, recent studies indicate that hunting does not play a role in the mortality rate of woodcock. The major factor impacting woodcock populations is the loss or degradation of prime woodcock habitat. This loss is due to abandoned farmlands succeeding into mature forested habitat, development, and the draining of swamp bottomland forest. Long-term population declines are expected to continue unless current land use practices change. In an effort to address these declines, the Woodcock Task Force (Woodcock Website under construction) has been assembled to develop a woodcock conservation plan. A draft is scheduled for summer 2005.

What type of habitat do woodcock need? Woodcock habitat requirements vary throughout the day and the season. They need adequate layover habitat and food resources during migration. They spend their days in moist, young forests which provide dense cover and food resources. Dense hardwoods on good soils with an abundance of earthworms is considered optimal habitat. During summer, young hardwoods and mixed woods with shrubs provide daytime cover for feeding. At dusk, the birds fly from the protective cover of their dense woods to large fields or openings to roost, mate, or feed. The singing grounds consist of forest clearings, abandoned fields with scattered low brush, open fields next to forest edges, clear-cuts, roads, and pastures. More likely the quality of the adjacent habitat for nesting and brood-rearing determines if a male uses a site for courtship display. Nests and broods are found in young to mix-aged forests, with young, open, second-growth stands preferred. Nests are usually within 300 feet of a singing ground. Woodcock will also nest in young stands of hardwood regeneration, damp woods, briar patches, above moist bottomlands, old fields with low cover, and shrub thickets. Conifer stands may be important for survival during drought. Their winter habitat must also contain adequate food resources and cover. A variety of cover types are utilized during the day, especially bottomland hardwoods and upland mixed pine-hardwoods.

What can you do to help out American Woodcock? You can help by managing your forest for a diverse-age forest canopy. Promote areas containing early successional forest types. An area of thick, lush shrub and tree growth exposed to full sunlight is optimal habitat as it contains a variety of food resources and shelter. Plant trees and shrubs if none exists. Regenerate existing hardwood stands through cutting or burning to allow in more light and increase shrubby growth.

Remember to provide the 4 critical habitat types in close proximity to one another:

1. clearings for courtship display sites, a quarter of an acre considered adequate
2. moist, fertile, dense growth for daytime feeding
3. young secondary-growth hardwood forest for nesting and brood rearing
4. large fields for night time roosting.

Furthermore, you can assist by monitoring American Woodcock populations through Audubon's Christmas Bird Count and by reporting sightings to eBird (<http://www.audubon.org/bird>). For more information on American Woodcock, log onto <http://migratorybirds.fws.gov>, <http://shorebird.fws.gov>, <http://www.wildlifemanagement.info>, and check for the Woodcock Website to go on-line soon.

Chronic Wasting Disease

Chronic wasting disease (CWD) is a fatal disease that attacks the brain and spinal cord of deer and elk, i.e., white-tailed deer, mule deer, and Rocky Mountain elk. While over 1400 animals have been checked in Maryland, to date there are no confirmed cases in this state. However, several cases have been discovered in captive deer in New York State. While there is no known cure for this disease, research has not demonstrated transmission of CWD between deer or elk and humans. However, consumers of venison are advised not to eat sick deer, or eat the central nervous system tissue of deer. Precautions for handling and processing deer, and what to do if a sick deer is encountered, are detailed on the Maryland Department of Natural Resources Wildlife and Heritage Service web page:

<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/wildlife/cwdinformation.asp>.

MERLIN Online for All Your Maryland Mapping Needs

The public now has access to an electronic atlas which produces custom maps for any location in Maryland. In an effort to promote wise economic development and stewardship of our natural resources, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources collaborated with MicroImages, Inc. to create a simple yet powerful internet tool know as MERLIN Online. This program allows a user to point to a location on any of the MERLIN maps and obtain information about the site for all the data layers in the system. There are nearly 100 data layers available such as property maps, sensitive areas, historic sites, soils, land use, water features, roads, topography, just to name a few. Users can access metadata, which is data about the data such as how and who produced it, the accuracy and age of the data, and attribute codes, all of which help the user to better understand the data they are viewing.

Landowners can obtain a wealth of information about their property. Aerial photographs are an excellent tool for viewing the connections between your property and the surrounding areas. Forest landowners can locate sensitive areas such as wetlands, critical area boundaries, and endangered species issues, all important considerations when harvesting timber. Soil maps are available as well as changes in land use since 1990. Users can overlay property boundaries, roads, elevation data, and water features. You can even measure distance and area of a timber harvest, show x and y coordinates, create a map legend, and hyperlink to data layers on other web pages. Users only need internet access and a modern web browser, with Java™ enabled. Java™ is downloaded, at no cost, when the user connects to the system. Downloaded files are usually large and fast connections are preferred, but slow phone modems will work. Systems with firewalls and pop-up blockers may need to have settings adjusted. Assistance with this and more is provided in the Frequently Asked Questions, Help Guide, and tutorials. The public may have restricted access to select data.

Simply log onto www.mdmerlin.net and follow instructions. Whether you are an elementary school student, a private forester, or a professional land use planner, check out MERLIN Online for all your economic development and natural resource questions and concerns to see what spatial data you can use to help you make more informed decisions. A wealth of information on the state of Maryland is now available at your fingertips with just a simple key stroke.

Coverts: Make a Difference

Maryland's Coverts Project is entering its 15th year of training volunteers on forest wildlife management techniques. The University of Maryland Cooperative Extension has teamed up with the Ruffed Grouse

Society, a nonprofit organization dedicated to forest wildlife conservation. They have combined their expertise to teach woodland owners, managers, and environmentally concerned individuals sound forest wildlife management practices through a neighbor-helping-neighbor educational program: the Coverts Project. This project aims to develop a statewide network of trusted friends and neighbors, called Coverts Cooperators. Cooperators not only learn how to properly manage woodland for timber and wildlife, but actually become agents of change by sharing this information with others in their community.

Why this neighbor-helping-neighbor approach? Because landowners are more inclined to implement a wildlife or forestry practice or contact a professional forester only after being encouraged by a trusted friend or neighbor who does not harbor ulterior motives. The practice of neighbor-helping-neighbor is particularly important considering that public resources are becoming increasingly limited while the number of woodland landowners who need educating on timber and wildlife management is increasing. Furthermore, these landowners often do not know where to turn for reliable information or how to get started on woodland management. The Cooperators can serve as a catalyst on a local, individual level, bringing together landowners and others searching for information about managing their woodland. The Cooperators can guide their neighbors towards forest and wildlife professionals who, in turn, can recommend proper management practices.

What is involved with the Coverts Project? Roughly 30 individuals are selected each year to participate in an intensive 3 1/2-day training seminar in September. All meals, lodging, training and reference materials are paid for by the Ruffed Grouse Society. Participants will be trained and educated in sound forest wildlife management practices. In exchange, the participants agree to become Coverts Project Cooperators, returning to their communities to share their knowledge with others.

Act now! Applications for the fall 2005 seminar are being accepted now until June 30. Interested persons can contact Cindy Mason at 301-432-2767 x301 or email cmason@umd.edu. Information is also available on our website: <http://www.naturalresources.umd.edu>.

Maier Family Winner of 2004 MD Tree Farm Award

Out of 1,300 Maryland tree farmers, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources Forest Service selected Henry and Nancy Maier's Oliver Beltz Road Farm for the 2004 Maryland Tree Farm of the Year Award. Their tree farm, which makes up more than half of the 100 acre Maier farm, has been a certified tree farm since 1991. It was established to improve wildlife habitat and forest products, protect soil and water resources, and for recreational use. The land, located atop Warrior Mountain, has been in a forest management plan for 18 years. Randy Kamp, an Alleghany County forest ranger who nominated the Maiers, states "Henry and Nancy are some of our best ambassadors for forest stewardship and they will tell anyone who will listen about the joys and benefits of properly managing your property."

In keeping with their ambassador-like persona, the Maiers have opened their land to the public by holding a field day at their farm with logging demonstrations and woodland walks, hosting a Boy Scout jamboree camping event, and by allowing surveying students of Alleghany College of Maryland on their farm for hands-on field work. The Maiers are members of the Maryland Farm Bureau and have participated in the Maryland Coverts Project (see Coverts article on page 3). Here they learned the latest forest wildlife management practices that they will share with the community. Congratulations to Henry and Nancy Maier. Our thanks to you for your dedication to your community and Maryland's natural resources!

New Publication

University of Maryland, Maryland Cooperative Extension Home and Garden Information Center announces a new publication, *Native Plants of Maryland: What, When and Where*. This 23-page booklet costs only \$5.00 and lists native plants by type and preference, with separate lists of plants for specific growing conditions. There is a common name index, list of invasive non-native plants, plus additional references and glossary. For more information or to order the publication, log onto their website at <http://www.hgic.umd.edu> or phone 1-800-342-2507.

Upcoming 2005 Stewardship Events

- **October 6-November 17. Forest Landowner Short Course, Grantsville, MD.** Six week course by Maryland Cooperative Extension includes notebook of materials and a CD including all presentations and references. Thursday evenings, 7-9 p.m. Includes six inside sessions and one field trip. For more information, contact Willie Lantz, Garrett County MCE, at 301-334-6966 or email wlantz@umd.edu.
- **November 4-5. Celebrating Our Past Creating Our Future, MFA Annual Meeting, Rocky Gap,** east of Cumberland, MD. Pre-registration required. For information, contact Jack Perdue (jackperdue@msn.com) or Karin Miller (mdforests@hereintown.net) or call MFA at 301-895-5369.
- **January 28, 2006. 19th Delmarva Forestry Seminar, Delaware.** Location yet to be confirmed. Information available from Dot Abbott-Donnelly at 302-697-4000 or email dotad@udel.edu. Details forthcoming.

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