

IN THE SOURLANDS

Meet Your New Neighbor: The American Woodcock

By The Sourland Conservancy

It's that time of year, again, when we rejoice in the hints and clues of spring making its way into being. For some of us, these hints include the blooming crocus in the yard, planting peas in the garden, or the regular adorning of rain boots. But for a naturalist, clues of spring's nearness include the migration of vernal pool amphibians, the return of the eastern phoebe's "fee-bee" – like song, and the curious courtship of the American woodcock. The latter, I believe, is the most peculiar and possibly animated sign of spring.

The American Woodcock is an anomaly of a bird. In the biological world, they are classified as a shorebird, but you won't ever see them at the beach, rather, they prefer old fields and shrubland. How about their physical anatomy? Well for starters, their large dark eyes are set towards the back of their head, which helps them to watch for aerial predators while they probe for worms. To help them locate these worms, they tune into worm sounds with their ears – located in front of their eyes, just behind their bill. Woodcock bills measure about two and a half inches in length, to help them reach burrowed worms, and the tip of the bill is flexible, so that the bird can pinch a worm while fully immersed in the mud and pull it out of the earth. In addition, this flexible tip is fitted with special nerve endings that can pick up a worm's slime trail up to 24 hours after it's laid. But, what really sets the woodcock apart from all of its other feathered brethren is the bird's brain. It's arranged basically upside down in the creature's head!

However, what it does share with other birds during this time of year is its desire to mate, and the male's ambitious attempts of getting the attention of its female counterparts rank number one on the spring to-do list. But, if you thought that this bird was starting to sound ordinary, let's delve into its springtime courtship. Just after the songbirds have finished their evening chatter and the sky shines with the stars of Orion's Belt, male American woodcock make their way to a simple stage amongst the tall grasses of the field. To announce their arrival and get the attention of their female audience, males circle around the stage, calling out several loud, nasally peent calls as they move. After properly defining their stage, the males then begin an upward, spiraling flight accompanied by a harmony of ethereal twittering and whistling sounds, made from vibrating feathers. At the apex of this flight, the bird is a speck in the sky to its human spectators, about 200 feet overhead.. From here, he descends in a lofty, zigzag flight, to his stage, singing a true love song to female woodcocks – lip puckering, kissing- like calls that last the fall to the ground. And his performance is repeated, for her pleasure, for about 20 to 30 minutes an evening during the early spring.

This woodcock show should be available for everyone to see. But the frank truth is that these amazing and unusual wild beings are disappearing from our landscape. Data from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service suggests that the bird's population has dropped 1.1% every year for the last four decades. The culprit? Habitat loss. Yes, things like shopping malls, housing developments and suburban crawl effect American woodcock population, but the source of shrubland disappearance is a little more subtle. Shrubland and young forests are maturing, and there aren't enough old, shrubby fields left to just go through succession, most are mowed or maintained. Prior to this area feeling the heavy hand of human

impact, natural disturbance kept the forests of the northeastern seaboard dynamic; there were different ages of forest dispersed throughout this region. Following the height of logging, and the abandonment of small farms, many of our cleared spaces grew to forest – at the same time. Now, our forestland is all about the same age. Currently, about 80% of New Jersey’s forests are 60 -99 years old, while 5% are between 0 and 19 years of age. The latter is breeding habitat for American woodcock and about 35 other songbird species. Conservationists have identified 65 species of conservation need, including birds, mammals and reptiles, which rely on early successional forests.

Hopewell Borough Park is one of those places in the Hopewell Valley that host the sky dance of the American woodcock. To preserve and protect this special place, the Mercer County Park Commission, Sourland Conservancy and Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space have partnered together to create a native plant shrubland and young forest in the old growth fields of Hopewell Borough Park. The two old fields at the south end of the park are on their way to young forest already. Our plan, to increase the percentage of native shrubs and trees in the shrubland, will begin over the next two years. We’ll be receiving technical advice and plant materials from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in support of the project and will be looking to local volunteers to help us get those native trees and shrubs into the ground. If you think you might want to participate in this unique restoration effort, interested individuals or groups are asked to contact Laurie Cleveland, Director of Communication & Development at the Sourland Conservancy at lcleveland@sourland.org.

Oh, the American woodcock have a few well-paired monikers. Do the names timberdoodle, mud bat or bog sucker tickle your fancy?

Learn more about the Woodcock Habitat Restoration Program by signing up for the Sourland Conservancy’s eNewsletter at www.sourland.org. The Sourland Conservancy works to protect the ecology integrity, historic resources and special character of the Sourland Mountain region.