

## Stillman Nature Center

33 W. Penny Road  
South Barrington, IL 60010-9578  
847-428-OWLS (6957)  
stillnc@wildblue.net  
www.stillmanncc.org

### Woodcock Obsession Stillman Newsletter, Spring 2004

You got to love a bird with monikers such as timberdoodle and bogsucker. Of course, it is most commonly known as the American woodcock and, each spring, it goes through its amazing mating ritual.

While researching this article, I found some old journal entries describing my earliest excursions into the woodcock's world here at Stillman. A woodcock, by the way, is a portly inland sandpiper with a long beak and short legs. It is a migratory species that does not return to the area until March.

Also, its mating displays are generally limited to the low-light conditions found on either side of sunset and sunrise. With these facts in mind, here are some edited journal entries from 1986.



March 23 - Between 11:00 and 11:30PM, the moon was bright enough to inspire a male woodcock. His "peent, peent" calls were the first I heard this season.

March 30 - I went out shortly after sunset to sneak up on the woodcock. On my way, I watched a great horned owl through binoculars as he left the willow from the northwest corner of the pond and dropped low over the area where the woodcock was. The owl paid little attention to the woodcock.

I, on the other hand, did watch the woodcock for quite some time. I got much closer to his "peenting" ground than the binoculars could focus.

He took off low on his display flights and I generally lost him behind bushes blocking my view. He was working hard for an unseen (to me) mate.



March 31 - Tonight, I moved carefully, but not too quietly, in an effort to get closer to the woodcock. The crunching leaves did not distract him from his mating show.

He took short steps (maybe long strides to a woodcock) and suddenly pulled up short. Then, he started off in another, seemingly at random, direction.

His actions were reminiscent of a toy robot I had as a kid. When confronted with a wall or other obstacle, the robot turned and proceeded in a different direction. The woodcock moved as if he was hitting invisible obstacles.

Every now and then the bird would make a longer than average run, maybe eight to ten feet, and then turn and start again. He would often take wing after one of these longer rushes.

He started north, curved to the east over the pond and out of my line of sight. As he was whistling and twittering overhead, I moved closer to where I thought the woodcock would land.

When the bird stopped calling, I stopped moving. In sailed the woodcock from the lighted western sky. He had a bat-like quality as he turned his wings flaps down and the sun shown through his brown translucent feathers.

April 3 - Estimating distance at night is a funny thing. Judging by the sounds, I was very close to the woodcock this evening. Right before each call, I could hear a brief water-drop sound. I cupped by ears to focus on this subtle whoop/whistle just before each "peent".

It was as if he was clearing his beak or made the noise as he breathed in just prior to making the much louder "peent". I was listening so intently that the woodcock's take-off startled me.

Once again, I adjusted my position in hopes of an even closer viewing or, should I say, listening. By this time, stars were visible overhead and the ground was quite dark.

I spot him low in the western sky as he returns in near silence. He lands so close that I can hear his feet hit the ground. Perhaps, I am too close as I can hear him walk quickly away.

The woodcock's calls diminish in intensity and regularity. I am suddenly aware of a variety of itches that, just minutes ago, wouldn't have dared present themselves.

Minutes pass. Darkness has completely enveloped the scene. I wonder where he went.

Slowly, I step towards home when I hear that characteristic whirring/whistle of the woodcock's wings. No nuptial display this time; just a sudden start to some secluded spot. At sunrise, the dance begins anew.

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