

A Woodland Shorebird Winters in Southern Illinois

by Frank Bennett

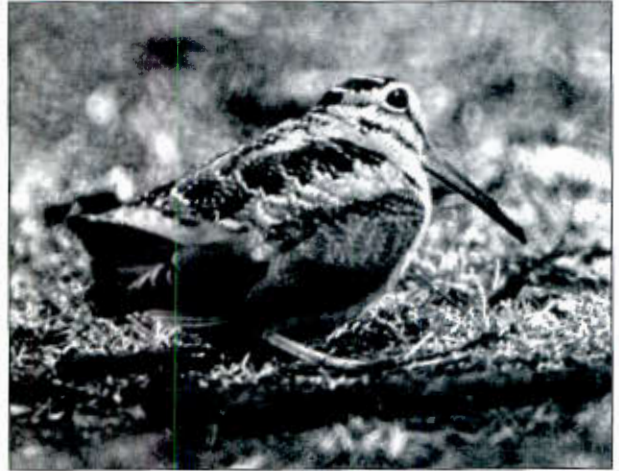
The start of the annual October and November rainy season signals the patiently waiting American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) to begin migrating south. The heavy rains also push the woodcock's favorite food, earthworms, very close to the surface, if not above the surface, supplying woodcocks and other species' nourishment during their long journeys south. In southern Illinois, a few American Woodcocks linger, which prolongs migration, but only an exceptional few stay throughout the winter.

It came as no surprise then that in late November 2001, American Woodcocks were still in southern Illinois. The surprise came one evening when the woodcocks began doing breeding displays, usually reserved for spring in Illinois, right near my home in New Columbia (Massac County). The displays were brief, but the woodcocks performed nightly through the end of November. Surely these birds would migrate soon.

The first half of December remained unseasonably warm, and the woodcocks continued to perform every night the first eight days of the month. They began at 5:05 p.m. and ended at 5:20 p.m. Most evenings, three males competed fiercely and sometimes could be seen side by side in an aerial duel. Their wings appeared at times to be touching as they circled higher and higher, sometimes disappearing when they flew so high up. Soon they would flutter back to earth like a fallen leaf, twittering and twisting the whole time. Moments after landing, they would resume their peenting. Each evening's performance was a little different. Some evenings one male would peent and do his flight displays; other evenings, three peented and did their aerial dances.

The woodcocks did not make an appearance 9, 10, or 11 December — two of those evenings it was raining. A single male was back in action 12 December. He began at 5:00 p.m. and ended at 5:12 p.m. I was not home 13 December. One male showed off again 14 December between 5:05 and 5:15 p.m. The temperature was in the 30s in the morning and the 40s during the day.

I did the Rend Lake Christmas Bird Count 15 December. Back at home on 16 December, the woodcock performance started again at 5:05 p.m. Two males began peenting and soon were into an aerial duel. They



The American Woodcock is a rare winter resident in southern Illinois. This photo was taken in Lincoln Park, Chicago, 28 March 1993 by Kanae Hirabayashi.

flew out of sight side by side. After they re-landed, another male entered the display field. Soon all three males were peenting, and before long, one after the other launched into an aerial dance. The birds performed until 5:25 p.m. and then came abrupt silence.

Only one bird made an appearance 18 December, but he put on a long performance of peenting with one aerial dance. He quit by 5:30 p.m. Two males dueled as usual at 5:05 p.m. 19 December, and 20 December, the third woodcock once again entered the field. The temperature remained above normal for this time of year.

Four birds were observed 22 December flying separately into the display field; three birds constantly peented and performed aerial flights repeatedly. This was by far the most active evening. The festivities began at 5:05 p.m., and ended at 5:22 p.m. Again, at 5:05 p.m. 23 December, two males peented and danced until 5:18 p.m. The next day, I heard two males peenting at 6:30 a.m.

I was unable to watch for another performance until 28 December, and no woodcocks were out that night. However, while walking the property during the day, I flushed three woodcocks. That would be my last sighting for woodcocks in December. Naturally, I could