



WOODCOCK *Scolopax rusticola*

The woodcock is a small wading bird which has short legs and a long, slender beak. It is a largely nocturnal feeder and spends most of its day resting in dense woodland cover.

Woodcock numbers in the UK are made up of a small resident breeding population, which is supplemented by birds that migrate here for the winter (mainly from Scandinavia, Finland, the Baltic States and Russia).

Research indicates that in the last 25 years, the UK's migrant woodcock population has remained stable, whereas the resident population has declined by more than 50 per cent due to a reduction in breeding range.

A recent study suggests that increased fragmentation of woodlands, lower diversity within woodland due to changing woodland practices, and higher predation pressures, have attributed to this decline. Disturbance is another possible reason for decline and shoots that specialise in woodcock shooting pay close attention to minimising unnecessary access to woodlands by themselves and others.

Identification features

- Long slender beak (6.5-8cm)
- Black, brown & cream/buff plumage
- Short pink/brown legs
- Very well camouflaged when on the ground and among leaf litter
- Males and females are difficult to distinguish

Length: 33-35cm
Wingspan: 55-65cm
Weight: 240-420g



Population

UK resident population: ~55,250 pairs
UK wintering population: 1.4 million birds

Conservation status

UK conservation status: **Red**
European conservation status: **Least Concern**
Global conservation status: **Least Concern**

When you can see them

Woodcock can be seen all year round in the UK, although they are elusive. They are more commonly seen in the winter months when the population is bolstered by additional wintering birds.

Woodcock are crepuscular birds, which means they are most active at dawn and dusk. They are most likely to be seen flying along woodland edges when flushed and feeding out on fields when it is dark.

Feeding

Woodcock feed by probing the damp ground with their beaks for animal material (e.g. worms, beetles, spiders, caterpillars, fly larvae and small snails).

When food is scarce during the winter months, they can also feed on plant material and seeds.

Preferred habitat

Woodcock make heavy use of deciduous or mixed woodland with clearings, glades or rides for daytime roosting and nesting attempts. Foraging predominantly takes place at night on grazed pastures because they typically support good numbers of the larger species of earthworm that woodcock prefer.

Distribution

In summer, woodcock can be found in suitable habitat throughout the UK, except for south-west England. In winter, birds arrive from Scandinavia, Finland, the Baltic States and Russia where the ground freezes, preventing them from feeding. This increase in numbers means woodcock become widespread throughout the UK with some variation in abundance, with central and southern England reporting lower numbers than eastern England, Wales and Scotland.



Breeding

- Eggs laid: March-April
- Typical clutch: four eggs
- Incubation period: 21-24 days
- Young are immediately mobile and able to leave the nest, but are helped with feeding for the first 4-5 days by the female
- Able to fly at 15-20 days
- Fully independent of the female at 5-6 weeks



What shooting does for woodcock conservation

- Woodcock rely on woodland that is in good condition.
- Over 500,000ha of woodland and 100,000ha of copses are managed for game shooting, many of which provide suitable conditions for woodcock.
- The effort expended on habitat and wildlife management by shooters for the maintenance of woodland is greater than the equivalent of 1,600 full-time jobs.
- Some shoots take part in woodcock ringing through the work of organisations like the Woodcock Network.
- Shooters also take part in other science programmes, such as woodcock wing surveys run by BASC, which give us insights into the health of the overall population.
- Shooters recording their bags of woodcock each year and sharing this information provide key data needed to assess sustainability.
- Shooters observing the guidance on sustainable shooting and management in this document can take a sustainable harvest of woodcock, thereby supporting the retention, management and expansion of the habitat and conditions on which woodcock rely.

GWCT research has shown that woodcock require woodland habitat containing a mix of different tree types and a variation in tree structure. Suitable wet woodland, preferred by the woodcock, is more likely to contain birch trees, which typically grow in wetter conditions.

Open areas such as rides and clearings are needed by woodcock for display and courtship (roding displays). Land managers are advised to cut back glades and rides annually to increase light and openings in the canopy.

During the winter, woodcock require access at night to open fields to feed. When breeding, they will nest on the woodland floor and forage for food in woodland which is damp and wet.

Taking opportunities to help with ringing programmes, like those undertaken by the Woodcock Network, helps us understand woodcock populations and movements.



Land management for woodcock

- **Maintain large areas of well-connected, deciduous/mixed woodland**
Woodcock appear to thrive best in large, well-connected and diverse woodland.

- **Encourage woodland understorey growth**
Since woodcock are ground-nesting birds they are vulnerable to predation, a factor proven to limit the nesting success of many ground-nesting birds. Their plumage, however, provides excellent camouflage in woodland undergrowth and against leaf litter, helping to hide them from predators.

Coppicing, good ride management and glade creation are recommended outside of the nesting season. Managing deer to prevent over-browsing of low-level foliage can help maintain a suitable woodland understorey for the woodcock to hide in.

- **Avoid disturbing woodcock when they are breeding**

Research has shown that woodcock fare better when breeding and rearing young if human disturbance is kept to a minimum.

It is recommended that the areas where breeding woodcock are known to be present are avoided, dogs are kept on leads and woodland management tasks, especially the use of machinery, are suspended during the nesting season to prevent any unnecessary disturbance.

- **Avoid disturbing woodcock when they arrive in winter**

Woodcock may appear at any time from November but the full moon in November is a traditional peak for arrival. When they arrive, they need to be able to sleep and feed with as little disturbance as possible so they can recover condition quickly. This gives them the best chance to withstand early periods of hard weather and to avoid predators; an exhausted woodcock is an easy meal for a fox.

Sustainability and eating what you shoot are both essential and two of the pleasures of good shooting.



Management of shooting

The land management typically undertaken on a pheasant shoot is thought to be beneficial to woodcock as it provides suitable breeding habitat, controlled predator levels and suitable understorey growth as a result of coppicing and deer management. Disturbance is an issue for woodcock, so if you have a strong area for flushes be mindful to shoot lightly. Specialist woodcock shoots can tailor this management further, with some only beating woodlands and rough areas of cover once a season.

BASC believes that to stop shooting woodcock would not reverse declines in the long term because:

- the last 20 years have already seen a reduction in shooting pressure;
- any shooting ban may demotivate landowners from managing their land in a manner which suits woodcock;
- some parts of Britain only host migrant birds and therefore shooting will not affect the resident woodcock population.

BASC supports the following advice, much of which is underpinned by science from the GWCT:

- **Gain an understanding of your local woodcock population and do not shoot until the migratory population has arrived**

Improve your local knowledge about the presence and trend of resident birds, and numbers of woodcock typically present at different times during the year.

Refrain from shooting woodcock until the migrant population arrives to reduce the chance of a resident bird being taken. As a guide, don't shoot woodcock until late November. Do allow migrant birds at least a week of good weather to recover from their journey before shooting.

- **Show restraint even where resident birds are absent**

Refrain from over-shooting in areas where there are no local breeding birds. It is known that many migrant woodcock remain faithful to the same wintering sites year on year. Over-shooting can break this link, resulting in fewer birds returning to that area in the future.



- **Shoot flight lines with caution**

Avoid excessive shooting of birds on their flight lines, as this can severely reduce the population. Flight lines are the regular routes used by woodcock to travel between woodland and nearby fields at dawn and dusk in winter.

- **Shoot good woodcock woodlands sparingly**

Because woodcock are sensitive to disturbance, it is best to avoid visiting their favoured areas too regularly. If there is a conflict with game shooting activities, consider managing game by leaving some woodland and rough covers alone to act as woodcock refuges.

- **Stop shooting in freezing weather**

You should stop shooting woodcock after seven days of freezing temperatures, or after significant snowfall, and allow the birds to recover for a week before starting to shoot again. This is because evidence now suggests that woodcock may be particularly susceptible to cold weather. Frozen ground and deep-lying snow can prevent the woodcock from feeding, increasing the risk of starvation and probably predation.

How can you assess woodcock numbers?

Ensuring you have a good understanding of the population of woodcock on your ground is an important step to ensure shooting remains responsible and sustainable.

- **Complete a roding woodcock survey to look for breeding birds**

Between April and June, observe woodland edges and clearings at dawn and dusk to witness the woodcock's breeding display. The male woodcock

flies with rapid wingbeats over the treeline, overlapping other males, in order to compete for the female's attention.

- **Shoot day sightings**

Keep a record of any woodcock flushed on a shoot day. Note down the areas these flushes are seen. These records can be used to inform management plans and future shooting practices.

- **Stationary witness reports**

Sit out on a ride or on the edge of a woodland to observe the flight lines and flypasts and hear the audible calls of woodcock at dawn and dusk.

- **Counting at night**

This is an effective way to see woodcock during the dark or early hours. Quietly walking and using a hand-held spot lamp, torch or night-vision equipment to scan the fields and the woodland canopy should enable you to catch a glimpse of feeding behaviours or flying woodcock. Night-vision equipment is expensive but offers the distinct advantage that there is no visible light that can cause woodcock to flush. Those lamping for foxes often spot woodcock feeding, so do talk to them.

- **Avoiding peak migration periods**

To ensure that arriving birds have a chance to recover condition quickly and those leaving are also in good condition, we would recommend not counting woodcock around peak migration periods. For that reason, counting in early December is preferable to the week around the November full moon.

IMAGES: THE WOODCOCK NETWORK, CURTIS MOSSOP, IAN PRICE AND CELINE PENISTON-BIRD