

Feature

The wanderings of woodcock

The UK's premier woodcock researcher, Andrew Hoodless, explains how keepers can help with his research into this beloved bird.



THE WOODCOCK HAS LONG BEEN HELD IN HIGH esteem, both in those areas where it is hunted as the main quarry of the day and where it adds an extra thrill to pheasant days or rough days on the moor. Now, as much as ever, there is huge interest in this bird, not least because of two major initiatives to discover more about its mysterious life.

The Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) has pioneered research on woodcock since the late 1970s and is the only professional organisation in the UK studying this bird. However, with information from 24 satellite-tracked woodcock, we have recently gained some fascinating insights into migration routes and strategies. It is apparent that woodcock migration consists of a series of long flights of 600-1,100 km (375-690 miles), broken up by stops typically lasting at least 10 days. Flight speed averages about 30 km/h (19 mph), but can reach 93 km/h (58 mph). It is now apparent that as well as coming from Scandinavia and Finland, many of the woodcock that winter here originate from Russia, with some coming from breeding grounds in central Siberia, about 7,000 km (4,380 miles) away. One of the birds tagged in Cornwall in February 2012 flew to Siberia to breed last summer and survived to make it back to exactly the same breeding site this year. It is estimated that he has now flown at least 38,000 km (23,750 miles) during his life! This year he has been joined by two other birds, one tagged in Cornwall, the other in Norfolk. Clearly, this is an important breeding area for some of the woodcock that winter in Britain, a fact that would never have been discovered without satellite tracking.

The second major initiative has been the creation of the Woodcock Network by Owen Williams, the well-known sporting artist, resulting in a huge increase in the number of woodcock ringed. Since 2007, numbers ringed have crept up from the low hundreds to over 1,200 each winter, with ringing sites spread between Rum and Jersey. Not only does this effort provide recoveries on the breeding grounds, but information on the timing of movements, fidelity of birds to particular sites and measures of woodcock size and condition. Indeed, the Network is working closely with the GWCT to put the information collected to good use and has been collaborating in fitting birds with geolocators (miniature data loggers) and satellite tags.

So how can keepers help? The GWCT is keen to hear when and how many woodcock are seen across the UK. Many more bag records, particularly broken down by date through the season, are

required to give a comprehensive picture of woodcock numbers and distribution. This information is vital for estimating the size of the winter population and variation from year to year. This winter, I will also be looking at body condition and the effects of cold spells on woodcock and snipe and would like to hear from anyone who is prepared to surrender three or four birds for carcass analysis. I appreciate what good eating they are, but hope that a few can be donated in the name of science!

To see the latest positions of the GWCT's satellite-tracked woodcock, visit the Woodcock Watch website www.woodcockwatch.com and to learn more about woodcock ringing, see www.ringwoodcock.net

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WOODCOCK AUCTION

The fact that this ground-breaking work has been funded to date by the shooting community sends a powerful message about our desire to understand our quarry species better and to ensure a sustainable future for them. The GWCT is hoping to fit another 16 woodcock with satellite tags and 100 birds with geolocators to ensure a large enough sample to stand up to scientific scrutiny. However, this cutting-edge technology does not come cheap: each satellite tag costs £3,000 and each geocator £135. The GWCT and the Woodcock Network are holding an evening of talks and sporting auction in March 2014 to raise funds for woodcock research, with the target of £40,000 to £50,000. If there are any NGO members who are able to provide a sporting lot for the 2014/15 season to help raise funds, the support would be gratefully received.

FOR ANY QUERIES RELATING TO THE AUCTION AND SPORTING LOTS, PLEASE CONTACT JAMES MAUNDER TAYLOR AT [JAMESMAUNDERTAYLOR@YAHOO.COM](mailto:jamesmaundertaylor@yahoo.com)