



PHOTO: ISTOCK.COM/BOOKGUY

American Woodcock

Birds of Barrington:

AMERICAN WOODCOCK

WHEN I FIRST BECAME a serious birder while living in Northern Virginia, I heard friends talk about the American woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) and its extraordinary aerial displays in early spring. But I didn't actually see one until we moved to the Barrington area adjacent to a Cook County Forest Preserve. To my surprise and delight, woodcocks displayed every spring in the field right down the slope from our house. My husband and I took our young children there at twilight on mild evenings in late March and early April to watch the show. Later I learned that some of the birds stayed in the area to nest.

So arresting is the spring courtship ritual of the woodcock that Aldo Leopold, in his conservation

classic, "Sand County Almanac", devotes a section of his April chapter to the bird, called "Sky Dance". It remains the most lyrical description written of the bird's evening aerial aerobatics.

I had read about the bird's behavior and vocalization, so I knew what to look and listen for. Straight away I found it's much easier to hear a woodcock than to see it. "Peent! Peent!" it calls from a spot usually in a shrubby field, almost always camouflaged by its cryptic plumage against dried grass. Early on I learned to listen carefully and soon I became pretty adept at locating the bird, even in the fast-dimming light. It was—and still is—always a thrill.

There in front of me is this plump bundle of earth-toned feathers, with seemingly no neck and

large black eyes near the top of its head and a straight, long bill, peenting away as it pivots ever so slightly in a circular pattern. Suddenly, with no perceptible warning, the woodcock rockets out of the turf, usually in a diagonal vector toward the sky with an audible, strong flutter of wings until it reaches the apex of its trajectory and circles for a minute or so with sounds that strike me as high-pitched chirping or twittering before it plummets once more to the ground, often to nearly the same spot it started, where it begins the performance all over again.

It is difficult to articulate the flavor that such an experience conveys. There is the anticipation (Will one perform tonight? Is one even here?) as daylight wanes. Sometimes it's cold, more often



American Woodcock

with a suggestion of coming spring warmth. Sometimes there are sounds of other birds retiring—song sparrows, cardinals, or of ones just becoming active, such as great horned owls.

As the sky grows darker and darker and I begin to despair of a woodcock performance that evening, an unmistakable “Peent!” pierces the darkness and my discouragement. From that moment on, the impact is utter transfixion. The ground pivot, the catapult from the grass, the effort to locate the silhouette of an avian rocket against a cobalt sky, then follow it as it circles high above—the unfolding performance engages every ounce of observation skill, every bit of attention. The quest is a challenging one, but what a deep sense of insight it offers into one of nature’s most magical dramas.

Last year my only opportunity to search for woodcocks occurred on the evening of March 17. Because the field where I had first discovered them has been cleared for prairie restoration (a good thing!), I had to walk a long way to a shrubland where I had seen them in previous springs. As darkness fell, I heard thunderous booming and wondered if a storm was approaching. But the sky was clear. The noise continued. I almost didn’t hear the first peents when they began, and it dawned on me that somewhere not too distant, a town was celebrating St. Patrick’s Day with fireworks. At first, I found the man-made noise annoying, but as I walked home after watching and listening to the woodcock display for nearly a half hour, the juxtaposition of man-made fireworks and the spectacle of woodcocks, one of nature’s most interesting creatures, seemed fitting. And I was most grateful to be witness to the latter. U

Article reprinted with permission from
365Barrington.com.



Wendy Paulson is a teacher and naturalist who has lived in the Barrington area for over 40 years. She revived the Nature Lady program in District 220 schools, started and directed the education program for Citizens for Conservation, and has led regular bird walks in Barrington and Chicago, as well as in New York City and Washington, D.C. She

currently teaches the Birds in My Neighborhood, a program she helped start with Openlands in Chicago Public Schools.

Custom Quality Design / Installation
Property Maintenance
Licensed - Insured - Bonded
Trucking and Bulk Material Delivery
Bobcat / Excavating Services

WE SERVICE BOTH RESIDENTIAL AND COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES

224-848-1751
www.cp-landscaping.biz
preston@cp-landscaping.biz

facebook AUTHORIZED CONTRACTOR

Prate ROOFING & INSTALLATIONS LLC
847-NEW-ROOF
info@prateroofing.com
Residential · Industrial · Commercial

THANK YOU BARRINGTON for allowing **Prate Roofing** to be the quality roofing contractor of choice!! We look forward to continuing to provide our customer base with the best in quality and service for all types of roofing, and custom architectural metal work, including historic and landmark restoration.

Book our services soon, the weather is breaking early!

847-526-6402
www.prateroofing.com

Thank you from all of us at the Prate Roofing family!

Illinois Unlimited Roofing License #104.016512