

## The American Woodcock: The Coolest Sign of Spring There Is

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Spring is undeniably on its way to The Land Between.

While the season may feel pretty different for many of us doing our part by staying home, there are still some sure fire signs of spring we can look forward to.

There are the longer days, which give us more daylight hours to get outside and go for walks (while following social distancing rules of course). What's more, the warmer weather means when we do go outside, we don't have to wear 10 layers of clothing to keep warm.

In my opinion however, the most exciting sign of spring is the return of the migratory birds to The Land Between.



One of our coolest and earliest returnees is the American Woodcock, a robin-sized shorebird with a lot of character. These birds will be here anytime now, as they often arrive in their northern breeding grounds (southern Canada) by March.

### **About the American Woodcock**

The American Woodcock is a plump, short-legged bird with a long, straight bill, and a short neck and tail. Males and females have the same black, grey, brown and beige (“mottled”, in bird lingo) colour pattern, allowing them to blend in with their forest floor habitat.

What makes this bird so cool you might ask?

For starters, it goes by all kinds of crazy names. The American Woodcock is also known as the Timberdoodle, Bog sucker, Labrador Twister, Hokumpoke, and Mudsnipe. And these are just some of the better ones.

The birds also have a very interesting way of eating. American Woodcocks use their long bills to probe moist soil for earthworms, their primary source of food. Sometimes, the birds will rock back and forth as they forage, sending vibrations through the ground that may trigger the earthworms to move. It is thought the American Woodcock may be able to detect this movement, and therefore know where to probe. Check out this fascinating foraging behavior [here](#).

While the American Woodcock is hunting for worms, it can still keep a look out for danger. This is because its eyes are positioned very high and far back on its head, allowing it to look out for predators even while it has its bill in the soil.

Lastly, and perhaps the coolest of all, male American Woodcocks have a very elaborate and impressive mating performance. These dances take place in areas called singing grounds, which are generally in clear spaces such as on the edge of back roads, or in old fields.

To start, from the ground, the males repeat a “*peent*” call several times. Click [here](#) for a listen. The male then flies upward 100 to 300 feet (30-90 metres), and hovers in a circle for a while. Finally, he returns to the ground in a spiralling, zig-zag pattern, and resumes his *peenting*. Pretty.Darn.Neat!



### **American Woodcock Conservation**

The American Woodcock is not listed as a Species at Risk in Canada or in Ontario, but its numbers have been declining. Data gathered through the annual American Woodcock Singing Ground Survey found Ontario Woodcock populations have declined by about 2.2% over the past 10 years (Jones 2019).

The primary threat to the American Woodcock is the loss of suitable habitat. The birds rely on young forests for many aspects of their lives. As a result of human suppression of natural processes that would create young forests such as floods and fires, as well as the continued expansion of human development, much of the suitable habitat of the American Woodcock has been lost.

### **How You Can Help**

Things like keeping your pet cat indoors (see our blog post on this subject [here](#)), buying bird-friendly products, and supporting nature conservation efforts in general, can go a long way in helping to maintain healthy bird populations, and healthy bird habitats.

More specifically, and only if the local guidelines for COVID 19 allow this, you can participate in the American Woodcock Singing Ground Survey citizen science project taking place this spring. Each participant is assigned a route to travel to listen for and record singing male American Woodcocks. The information gathered through these surveys is used to inform the sustainable management of the species' populations. For more information about the American Woodcock Singing Ground Survey, or to register for a route, click [here](#).

For more information about other citizen science projects, bird related or otherwise, that are offered by The Land Between, visit our Citizen Science Centre page [here](#). (Please note that we are changing our protocols and restricting activities to protect human life and abide by COVID 19 protocols)

### **Sources:**

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