

The American Woodcock is a common, but declining breeder in forests in the Hudson River Valley.

Conservation Status

New York considers the American Woodcock as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need and the U.S. Shorebird Conservation Plan notes it as a Species of High Concern based largely on decreasing population trends, but also because of threats on its breeding and non-breeding grounds.



Identification

This bird is extremely distinctive both in terms of appearance and behavior. It is a chunky bird with a long, straight bill, short legs, and large eyes set far back on its head. Its plumage is an intricate pattern of light and dark colors that serves as camouflage. Its two most distinctive plumage marks are a buffy-orange breast and broad black lines that run across the bird's head and back of its neck. It is most often identified by the "peent" call of the male, who performs a spectacular "sky dance" display over open clearings or roads, which involves flying spirally upward while creating a twittering sound with its flight feathers.

Habitat

Although generally considered a forest edge species, this bird requires a mix of habitats that vary with activity, time of day, and season. These habitats include 1) forest openings or clearings for singing displays in spring; 2) alder or other young hardwoods on moist soils for feeding and daytime cover (moist, loamy soils are important to maintain abundant earthworms), 3) young second-growth hardwoods for nesting; and 4) large fields for night-time roosts.

Birds spend the day in wet wooded areas, but move to open fields and other clearings during the evening hours. In the spring, these open areas serve as a stage for males' amazing "sky dance." Several males gather together in an area, where each gives a loud, nasally "peent" call from the ground. Eventually, a male will take flight, rising high into the sky in a spiraling flight before dropping down, somewhat leaflike, to the ground. While in the air, the male gives a variety of twittering sounds, which are produced vocally and by the rushing of air over the wing feathers. Females gather at the edge of displaying grounds and select one male as a mate. These display areas for courtship and roosting sites include forest openings, clear-cuts, fields, dirt roads, blueberry fields, new tree plantations, and pastures and abandoned farmland such as hay fields adjacent to feeding sites. At nighttime birds roost in fields that are commonly 3-5 acres.

Food

This bird eats invertebrates, especially earthworms, by using its long bill to probe mud, damp earth or leaf litter. Earthworms make up nearly 80% of their diet. When earthworms are unavailable or scarce as in early spring and winter, its diet may be broader and include larvae of beetles, flies, and other insects, and more rarely, ants, moths, snails, and seeds from various plants.

Nesting

After mating the male provides no help with nest building, incubating, or caring for the young. The nest is a scrape on the ground lined with dead leaves and is placed either in an open, second-growth deciduous forest with well-drained soils or in an overgrown field. Chicks leave their nest only a few hours after hatching and, while they are still fed by the female, the young begin probing for food after just a few days. After about five weeks the young are completely independent.

Threats

- Habitat loss and alteration through urbanization, reforestation, drainage of wetlands, and agriculture.
- Decline in food supply (i.e., earthworms) from changes in soil pH due to acid deposition.
- Lead contamination that is either ingested directly as shot or ingested through contaminated earthworms after being spread through the food chain.
- Decrease in quantity and quality of habitat as the rate of change from farm land into young growth forests increases.

Management Recommendations

- Create or maintain the various types of habitat required for feeding, display, roosting, and nesting. Habitats types need to be in close proximity (e.g., within 1/2 mile)
- Maintain at least 0.5 acres of open habitat for displays through plowing, mowing, or prescribed burns. Suggestion of one patch per 20-25 acres. The goal is for fields to appear "patchy," rather than uniform in structure. Moderate use of livestock grazing can also accomplish this. Mow every 2-4 years.
- Encourage native trees and shrubs.
- Maintain larger areas, 3-5 acres, of open habitat for nighttime roosts. Suggestion of one patch per 100 acres. Plant shrubs in open fields and around the perimeter of cultivated fields to provide roosting and escape cover.
- Maintain young, dense forest of at least 5 acres for nesting and feeding.
- Maintain grassy areas near water sources for feeding and display grounds.
- Monitor population through protocols developed under the American Woodcock Management Plan (the singing-ground survey and the wing-collection survey).

This management summary is adapted from Boothe and Parker 2000, Keppie and Whiting 1994 and NatureServe 2008.

For additional information, see the following references:

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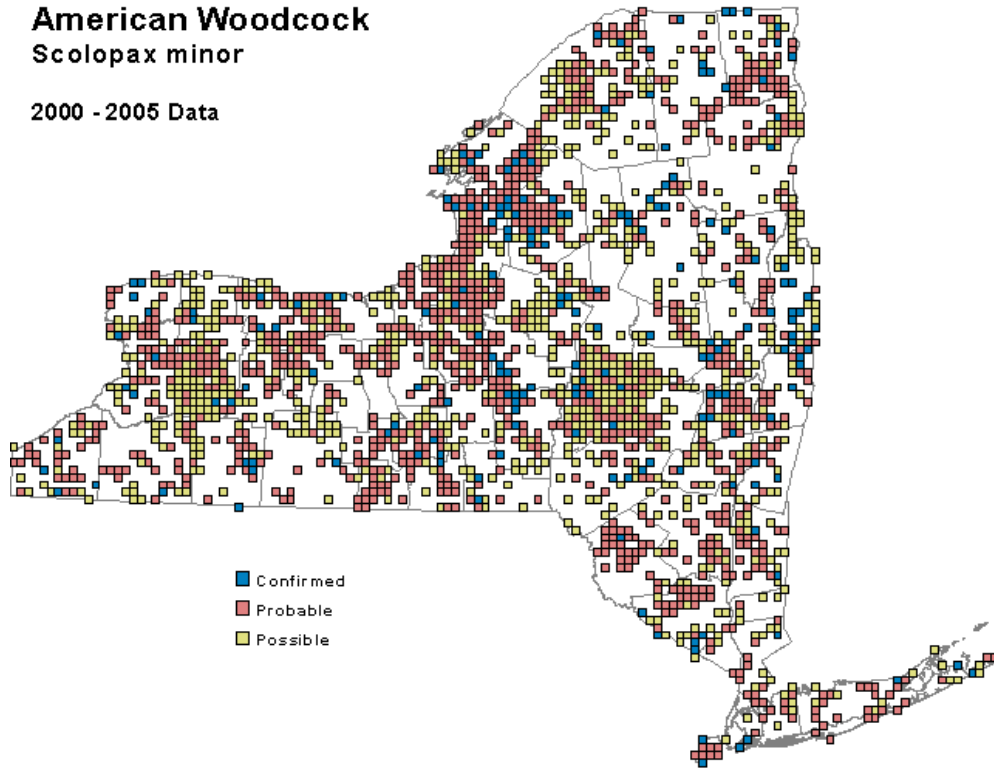
NatureServe. 2008. NatureServe Explorer: An online encyclopedia of life [web application]. Version 7.0. NatureServe, Arlington, Virginia. Available <http://www.natureserve.org/explorer>. (Accessed: April 12, 2008).

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NYS BREEDING BIRD ATLAS COMPARATIVE DATA

American Woodcock *Scolopax minor*

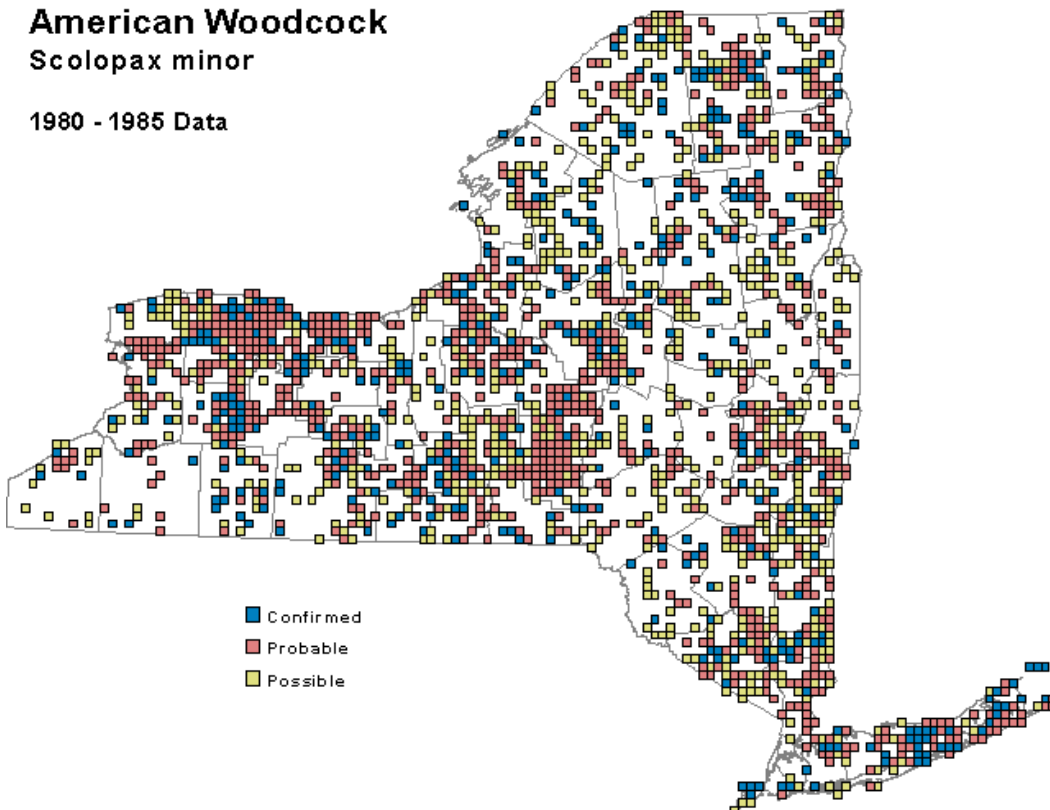
2000 - 2005 Data



- Confirmed
- Probable
- Possible

American Woodcock *Scolopax minor*

1980 - 1985 Data



- Confirmed
- Probable
- Possible