



WOODCOCK *Splash*



www.woodcockminnesota.org

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What do woodcock hunters do in the woods?

by David E. Andersen

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During the 2004 and 2005 woodcock hunting seasons, we had the opportunity to meet some of you at the parking lot of Four Brooks Wildlife Management Area in central Minnesota. When you pulled into the lot, we asked you whether you were in pursuit of woodcock, whether you would be willing to answer a few questions about your hunt, and whether you would be willing to carry a portable GPS unit while hunting.

Almost all of you said that you would be willing to help us find out more about woodcock hunters and helped provide us with some of the first information ever about how woodcock hunters hunt.

We summarized that information and recently presented the results of our study of woodcock hunters and woodcock hunting pressure at the 10th American

Woodcock Symposium convened in Roscommon, Michigan in October 2006. In this article, we want to convey some of those results to you.

Based on declines in woodcock heard peenting on annual Singing-ground Surveys and concern for woodcock populations in both the Eastern and Central Management Units, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shortened hunting seasons and reduced bag limits for woodcock in the 1990s.

Telemetry studies in the East, and more recently in the Upper Midwest, suggest that hunting may impact woodcock survival in some instances and not others, and that hunting pressure may vary considerably from year to year and from place to place. Because there was almost no information on woodcock hunting pressure at a local scale, and because we were completing a study of woodcock survival during the hunting season at Four Brooks and the adjacent Mille Lacs Wildlife Management Area in 2004, we set out to ascertain what woodcock hunters did in the woods.

By combining information we gained through interviewing hunters and analyzing their GPS tracks with information about how radio-marked woodcock were distributed across the study area, we were able to describe how hunting pressure was distributed, what influenced hunter success, and how radio-marked woodcock were distributed in relation to where hunters hunted.

In 2004 and 2005, we interviewed visitors to Four Brooks Wildlife Management Area at the primary access point and asked them if they



Nothing better than the sight of a young grouse and woodcock hunter and his dog. Here's WM member Danny Moors, from the State of Virginia.

were visiting the area to hunt upland birds. If they were, we asked them if they would voluntarily answer some questions about their hunt both before and after hunting, and whether 1 person in the hunting party would carry a GPS and record their track while hunting.

In 2004, we also borrowed vehicle counters from the Minnesota Department of Transportation, and set these up at all access points on the east end of Four Brooks. Based on interviews and traffic count data, we estimated that there were 110 visits to Four Brooks by upland bird hunters in 2004. Hunting party size averaged 1.48, resulting in a total of 163 hunter visits over the 42-day study period—a pretty high rate of use by upland bird hunters!

Twenty-seven percent of hunters indicated they were in pursuit of woodcock only, 34% were hunting both woodcock and ruffed grouse, and 7% were exclusively hunting grouse. Individual hunts averaged just over 2 hours, and on average, hunting parties bagged 0.54 woodcock and 0.18 grouse per hunt (2004 and 2005 combined). Seventy-seven percent of hunters employed hunting dogs (the most beautiful of which were drahthaars), with woodcock hunters being more likely to employ dogs than grouse hunters.

We found a few things that were somewhat surprising, at least to us, regarding how hunters hunted and what did or didn't influence their success. First, there was not a dramatic difference in the likelihood of bagging at least 1 bird between hunters that employed dogs and those who didn't. Second, hunters without dogs walked about the same distance as hunters with dogs, but hunters with dogs traveled faster. Third, hunters didn't travel very far from their vehicles—on average, hunters remained within approximately 1 km of where they parked (the maximum distance anyone traveled from their vehicle was approximately 3 km). Upland bird hunters exhibited a preference for aspen habitats, followed by marsh habitats, both of which were preferred over upland shrub and alder habi-

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See Woodcock Minnesota's web site at www.woodcockminnesota.org

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Randy Havel
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With the 2006 woodcock season behind us, it is my hope that your days afield were as rewarding as you expected.

With the passing of another season, we are reminded that the major projects we have undertaking are dormant until spring when our singing ground enhancement efforts will once again resume.

Our work with our Cass County and our habitat improvement efforts there continue.

Our August fundraising shoot was a great success with an increase in shooter numbers and beautiful weather. Thanks to all

those that helped out. The shoot continues to get better with each year.

If you didn't make the shoot last time around, give it your best shot next year. We had more youth participate in the 'game' portion of the day. it was very rewarding to see fathers, sons, and daughters enjoying the challenge. Of the moneys raised, 100% will go to our habitat enhancement projects and the singing ground survey with Dr. Dave Anderson, and our latest project the Cass County woodlot program.

Save us a Saturday in August of 2007, come out and support your efforts. The woodcock need you.

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Send in your renewals....

Woodcock Minnesota is a membership funded organization. The annual memberships expire December 31 each year. If you have not renewed, the form is on page 4. Fill it out and send it in. Or visit www.woodcockminnesota.org and renew using our secure online renewal form by clicking the join button. The woodcock need you!



Woodcock Minnesota President Randy Havel traded life memberships with The Ruffed Grouse Society's CEO Mike Zegata this past Fall.

Please consider upgrading your annual membership to a life membership. 100% of our profits go on the ground in Minnesota for projects that directly benefit woodcock, and indirectly benefit hundreds of game and non-game species.

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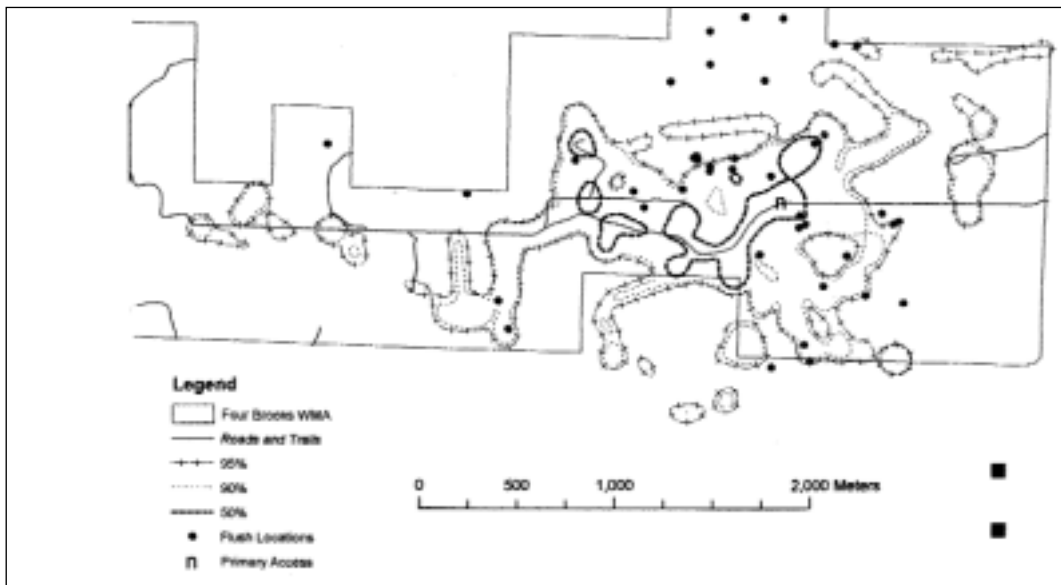
The shoot date is set....Aug 25, 2007

Last year's event was a great success. This year once again we are making it a one-day event with

both the Scattergun Tune-up and Side by Side Challenge held on the same day. The now famous 'woodcock walk' shooting challenge will be back along with the other shooting games.

The meal served by Rice Creek was fabulous. Just about everyone at the award banquet went home with a prize.

Please mark August 25, 2007 off on your calendar today.



WOODCOCK HUNTERS--
from page One

tats. Perhaps most interesting was that hunters didn't stray very far from trails. We estimated hunting pressure based on where hunters who carried GPS units spent their time. The following figure is similar to a topographic map, with the smaller contours indicating where hunters, as a group, spent more of their time, and the dots indicating the approximate location of radio-

marked woodcock during the 2004 hunting season:

Three things jump out from this figure. First, most hunting pressure was distributed near maintained trails. Second, woodcock were not distributed in association with trails, so most woodcock never experienced significant hunting pressure. Third, at least 1 hunter wandered off the wildlife management area, making a loop to the south.

So, what does this tell us about

how woodcock hunters hunt, and how can this information be used to manage woodcock? From a management perspective, the results of our study suggest that hunting pressure could be effectively managed through access to a general area, and the distribution of trails within an area. Even though Four Brooks received an estimated 110 visits by upland bird hunters in the 2004 hunting season, mortality from hunting in our radio-marked woodcock was

approximately 2.5%--a relatively low level.

We think that this is at least partially attributable to how hunting pressure was distributed (near the access point and close to trails), suggesting that limiting access to a few locations can provide upland bird hunting opportunity without resulting in low survival rates for woodcock.

Explanations for some of our other results aren't as clear. It isn't as clear why hunters with dogs fared no better than hunters without dogs. Perhaps woodcock hunters are primarily interested in working with their dogs, and less interested in shooting woodcock. Perhaps hunters with dogs are poorer shots than hunters without dogs. Perhaps woodcock hunters have dogs that don't find woodcock--there are numerous potential explanations that we were unable to assess.

What is clear, though, is that a whole bunch of woodcock hunters enjoyed the October woods in central Minnesota in pursuit of timberdoodles, had some success in doing so, and didn't appear to significantly affect survival of resident woodcock--good news for hunters and natural resource managers, and for woodcock, too.

More Wildlife On Your Land, more Cash In Your Pocket

James R. Kelley

Wildlife Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, Division of Migratory Bird Management.

Six million acres of Minnesota's forests (40% of the state total) are owned by families and private individuals. More and more, forest acreage is being divided into smaller tracts and being purchased for recreational purposes such as a weekend getaway or deer camp.

By actively managing these recreational lands owners of such tracts can have a large impact on the availability of suitable habitat for deer, woodcock, grouse, and other species that rely on young forests.

Unfortunately, when many people buy recreational property they take a "hands-off" approach to managing it. Other than clearing a portion of the property for a cabin, or maybe cutting some shooting lanes, the forest is allowed to mature. That is not good news for deer and other species that rely on young forests for all or part of their habitat needs.

The topic of forest management often quickly turns into an emotion-filled discussion. For decades, some groups have shouted that clearcutting is bad, we must stop cutting trees and that bird species that rely on mature forests are in rapid decline.

An examination of the facts reveals quite a different picture. During 1966-2005, the Breeding Bird Survey indicated that only 14% of bird species that are considered to rely on mature forest had significantly declining trends in Minnesota.

Interestingly, 49% of mature forest species had positive population trends. On the other hand, only 30% of species considered to inhabit young forests and shrublands had increasing trends and 25% had significantly declining trends. Recent research has also hinted that some "mature forest" bird species actually use young forest/shrub habitat during some portion of the year, especially during their juvenile stage.

All of this points to the fact that we need both young and old forest on the landscape, not just one or the other.

So why are we talking about birds rather than deer? Because managing for deer not only provides cover and food resources for deer, but also a wide variety of game and non-game species.

A quick review of forest succession concepts will point out why it is important that you, the landowner, actively manage your woodlot if you want an abundance of wildlife on your property.

A variety of disturbance factors such as fire, blowdowns, and insect infestations historically created openings of various sizes within a forest. Such openings provided sites for

regeneration of young forest in the landscape, which is called early succession habitat. In recent times, humans have largely removed natural disturbance factors such as fire, thus allowing forests to mature unchecked.

Although mature stands of some forest types will provide food resources such as mast for deer, shading will likely reduce the understory component, thus reducing sources of deer browse and protective cover for other species.

With increasing forest age the density of tree stems declines, making such sites less suitable for nesting by species such as woodcock and grouse. In the absence of natural forest disturbance factors, it becomes increasingly important for landowners to replicate those factors in the form of active woodlot management. And, the nice part is, you do not need a large acreage to make such management financially profitable and wildlife-friendly.

An inventory of your forest tract will give you an indication of the composition of your forest and its potential economic and wildlife values. Tree species composition of your woodlot will influence the options you have available for managing to benefit wildlife. For instance, if you have a pure stand of over-mature aspen you can easily create excellent woodcock nesting cover and deer browse by clear-cutting the stand, which will stimulate aspen root-suckering and production of high densities of saplings. If you have a stand domi-

nated more by softwoods, cutting will still benefit early-succession species but you may not get the same rapid response you would get from an aspen stand. Elevational gradients should also be considered. For example, woodcock prefer to forage for earthworms in moist soils. Therefore, consideration should be given to regeneration of young forest along soil moisture gradients to provide feeding cover and a constant supply of earthworms throughout the spring and summer. These are some of the types of issues that might not normally be incorporated in woodlot management plans.

With increasingly frequency the forest products industry is becoming

more flexible in where and how it obtains wood fiber.

Perhaps more importantly, the industry has been making a conscious effort to adopt management practices that are environmentally sound. This creates an ideal situation for a small woodlot owner who has merchantable timber and wants to create early succession habitat for deer and other wildlife.

Alternately, there may be forest landowners that are not aware of the possibilities that exist for enhancing the value of their land for wildlife, and the possibility of receiving an economic return for such management.

Often it is the lack of practical how-to information and sources of technical assistance that prevents landowners from realizing these dual objectives.




Life Members Steve Wilds, retired USF&W Chief of Migratory Birds and Trevor Sumption, Woodcock Minnesota Treasurer relax after their annual woodcock 'meeting' last Fall,

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