

## Dancing Timberdoodle

The cheerful song of a robin at dawn is considered a sign that spring is moving across the land and winter is ended. Another sound that is just as much a part of the season is the nasal beeping of the American woodcock during twilight hours.

Perhaps while hiking through open woods or across a damp meadow, a bird springs from underfoot a flies away with a bubbling sound. You have met a woodcock which is called "timberdoodle" for its bubbling alarm notes!

Early spring is when the male woodcock turns to aerial romancing and performs a "sky dance" after sunset and at dawn. The dumpy, brown bird with its long bill seems hardly handsome, except in the eyes of another woodcock.

One place you are almost guaranteed hearing a bird performing is in Canaan Valley. Drive along the roads at sunset until you hear a nasal or buzzy sound somewhat like zeeeeep! coming from the edge of a meadow or boggy opening. A cock bird may be at an interlude in his performance.

Soon the bird will spring into flight and begin an upward spiral to a great height with a whistling of its wings. After an interval of silence, a chirping and clucking will be heard as it tumbles to earth. When there is a full moon, the woodcock will often sky dance throughout the night.

With the unfolding of spring and the beginning of nesting, the urge to engage in the instinctive ritual becomes more infrequent. Even so, many cock birds will turn to the courting flight off and on throughout the summer.

Even though the cock performs the courtship ritual with enthusiasm, there is no real pairing as birds of different sex have their own territory. The female gives little attention to nest building which is a sparsely lined depression on the ground where the four buffy eggs are laid.

Preferred nesting habitat is early stages of succession or the regeneration of plant life. Such situations were rather abundant in the early decades of the last century with the abandonment of much farmland. The young become active soon after hatching and make short flights at two weeks.

An abundant woodcock population nests in Canaan Valley where it was the subject of an extended study by state wildlife personnel for a period of years. Here habitat such as alder thickets and adjacent bogs have remained largely in a state of equilibrium over time.

The valley offers a vast area of prime conditions for essentially one great nesting ground for the tremendous number of birds found here. The number of woodcock in the valley at the end of the nesting season is estimated at well over a thousand.

The valley is one of three sites, along with Cape May, New Jersey and Cape Charles, Virginia, where birds gather by the thousands during the fall flight from Canada and the northeastern states. An estimated twenty thousand spend some part of their southward migration in the valley.

The woodcock remain largely unseen and unheard throughout much of the year when it remains hidden in a thicket or has migrated. The "timberdoodle" returns with spring to set the twilight hours abuzz with its aerial efforts at romance.