

Woodcock: Your Essential Brief



Q: Is the global estimate of woodcock¹ falling?

A: No. The global population of 10-26 million² individuals is considered stable³.

Q: Are the woodcock that migrate here each autumn declining?

A: No. Approximately 800,000 to 1.3 million woodcock migrate to Britain and Ireland each winter, mainly from Scandinavia, Finland, the Baltic States and Russia, where results from a joint Franco-Russian survey indicate that breeding populations appear stable.

Q: Do some woodcock stay here all year?

A: Yes. There is a resident British population of 55,000 male woodcock in spring, equating to about 180,000⁴ individuals in autumn. It is this population which has declined by 29% in 10 years. The population and range contraction is considerable and we expect the species will join others on the red list of conservation concern in the UK.

Q: Was the decline in resident woodcock a surprise?

A: No. Many woodland birds have been declining⁵ in range and abundance through the latter half of the 20th century. Our resident woodcock population has slowly declined since its peak in 1970⁶.

Q: Why did the resident woodcock population increase prior to 1970?

A: Woodcock were rare or absent as breeding birds until about 1850. The initial increase was probably due to the extensive planting of woods managed for pheasant shooting⁷. The increase continued with the planting of large conifer forests in the 1950s and 1960s across Scotland, Wales and East Anglia.

Q: Do we know why our resident woodcock population has been declining for 40 years?

A: No. This mysterious and cryptic species is difficult to study and we simply don't know all the answers yet. It is likely to be a combination of: increased fragmentation of woodlands⁸; change in woodland structure as forests mature; rising deer numbers reducing understorey vegetation and increased disturbance; increased predation pressure; recreational disturbance by dog walkers; the disappearance of permanent grasslands and perhaps game shooting.

¹ Eurasian Woodcock *Scolopax rusticola*

² Wetlands International 2006

³ Bird Life International

⁴ 55k males and we assume an equal number of females, 60% annual survival and an average of 1.8 chicks fledged per pair

⁵ Fuller et al. 2005

⁶ BTO: CBC all habitats 1966-2000 Woodcock

⁷ Holloway, S. 1996. *The Historical Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland: 1875-1900*. BTO

⁸ del Hoyo et al. 1996

Q: Do we know why woodland birds in the UK have been declining?

A: The declines of several species have been linked to changes in the structure and mixture of trees and shrubs in woodland, particularly a reduced, less diverse shrub layer and loss of open space in woodland^{9,10}.

Q: Why are our woodlands changing?

A: An increasing trend in average woodland age⁹ since the large-scale post-war afforestation of the late 1940s and 1950s as well as modification, reduction or cessation of management¹⁰ in many woods are usually agreed to be important factors driving such changes. In many cases, these issues may be compounded by the impact of increased browsing pressure from rising deer¹¹ numbers and climate change¹².

Q: Is it just down to woodland?

A: No. For example, there is no good explanation why the bird appears to have always been absent from south-western England, where there appears to be plenty of suitable woodland.

Q: Could we copy the targeted recovery model used for curlew buntings and bitterns?

A: No. Unlike curlew buntings and bitterns, which are very rare and are associated with small isolated habitats, the woodcock is still widespread so a highly targeted approach to recovery is unlikely to achieve a national recovery. A more effective approach will be to work with landowners to create and manage suitable habitat across the country.

Q: Where are woodcock seen breeding?

A: Breeding woodcock require open rides and clearings for display and courtship and have specific habitat requirements during incubation and brood-rearing¹³. Nesting Woodcock typically utilize woodland with open ground-layer vegetation and patches of overhead cover¹⁴. When feeding, sites where trees are relatively small and close together with a dense shrub or herb layer are preferred¹⁵.

Q: Where are woodcock seen feeding?

A: Woodcock feed primarily on earthworms and other soil-dwelling invertebrates¹⁶. During winter, they leave woodland to feed on open fields at night, but this becomes less frequent during the breeding season, when more time is spent foraging within woodland¹⁷. This may make soil moisture and the availability of wet feeding areas within woodland an important consideration, particularly where summers have become drier¹⁸.

Q: Can we use this existing research to advise landowners on improving habitat?

⁹ Hopkins & Kirby 2007, Mason 2007

¹⁰ Fuller et al. 2005, Amar et al. 2006

¹¹ Gill & Fuller 2007, Holt et al. 2011

¹² Leech & Crick 2007

¹³ Hoodless & Hirons 2007

¹⁴ Hirons & Johnson 1987

¹⁵ Hirons & Johnson 1987, Hoodless & Hirons 2007

¹⁶ Hoodless & Hirons 2007

¹⁷ Hoodless & Hirons 2007

¹⁸ Smart et al. 2006

A: Yes. If you would like to improve your woods for woodcock and other game and wildlife, call in your GWCT advisor.

Q Are woodcock shot in the UK?

A: Yes. From 1st October¹⁹ (1st September in Scotland) until 31st January it is legal to shoot both resident woodcock and those that have migrated here for the winter from Europe.

Q: The winter population from Europe may be stable but is shooting causing the decline in our resident woodcock?

A: No, we do not think that shooting is the main factor driving the decline, but at this stage we cannot rule it out as a contributing factor.

Q: Do we know what percentage of woodcock shot are resident?

A: Yes. Our research, using stable isotope analysis to determine the origins of woodcock shot in Britain and Ireland, indicates that 2% of woodcock shot are residents.

Q: Could shooting play a role in local woodcock declines?

A: We know the majority of resident and migratory woodcock are site faithful so any local changes in habitat, predation or shooting could all play a part in local population declines.

Q: Why are the GWCT asking people to delay shooting woodcock until 1 December?

A: As a precaution many shoots have voluntarily ceased shooting woodcock. The GWCT is asking those that still shoot woodcock to delay doing so until 1 December. This precaution ensures that shooting does not begin until most migrant woodcock have arrived from Europe, so reducing the chance of residents being shot.

Q: Is there any evidence that shooting pressure on woodcock is reducing?

A: Yes. There is an indication, at a national scale, of a reduction in shooting pressure over the last 20 years, with many people deciding voluntarily that they no longer wish to shoot woodcock. The GWCT intends to publish a scientific paper that covers this point.

Q: Why are the GWCT not calling for a ban on woodcock shooting?

A: Banning the shooting of woodcock will not reverse declines in the long term and a ban may simply prove counterproductive. Reversing the national decline of other quarry species, such as black grouse, has been achieved by working with shoots to maintain good habitat and protection from generalist predators alongside voluntary restraint.

Q: How might a ban be counterproductive?

A: A ban on shooting may remove the motivation for many landowners to manage their woods in ways that will maintain suitable habitat for woodcock. It is this motivation that helped black grouse to recover.

Q: What has the shooting community already done to help woodcock?

A: The vast majority of research on woodcock, including the two national surveys that confirmed the scale of decline in our resident birds, has been funded by the shooting community through a desire to better understand the ecology of the species and ensure that shooting is sustainable.

¹⁹ Woodcock may be shot in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Isle of Man and Eire Oct 1st- Jan 31st. In Scotland Sep 1st- Jan 31st.

Q: Has this woodcock research already proved its worth?

A: Yes. The survey methods used until 2002 (incidental sightings of woodcock during the course of general bird surveys) had significantly under-estimated the UK population at possibly 5,000-12,000 pairs. The GWCT's survey method (based on the sightings of roding males at dusk), now accepted as best practice, established that the population was in fact six times higher.

Q: How will further research help reverse the decline?

A: The GWCT has started to attach GPS tags to resident woodcock in order to better understand their breeding behaviour. Through following the precise movement of birds during the breeding season we can develop a broader understanding of their complex habitat requirements, the common causes of mortality, including predation, and the effects of disturbance. This information can then be used to provide the best possible advice to those that manage our woodland.

Q: Why not call for a ban on woodcock shooting until resident numbers increase?

A: We do not think that shooting has caused the decline in resident numbers, but we do know that shoots make an important contribution to the management of our woodland and woodcock habitat. We would like to harness that interest in shooting woodcock to understand more about the species and ultimately try and reverse declines.

Q: How can shoots help recover resident woodcock numbers?

A: Habitat appears to have a significant influence on the rise and fall of resident woodcock numbers. The habitat requirements of woodcock appear to vary with different stages of the life cycle. The mixture of woodland habitats, or the landscape as a whole, may have a significant effect on woodcock abundance. Shoots across the UK can help, both by gathering the evidence about the habitat requirements of the species and then by managing habitat appropriately.