Shooting of woodcock

In winter, the woodcock adds interest and excitement to shoots throughout Britain and Ireland. The secretive habits of this bird ensure that it is widely admired and respected. Current evidence suggests that over 90% of woodcock shot here migrate from Europe where breeding numbers appear stable. Resident British woodcock have increased and abundance and range since the 19th Century. Subsequent range contraction was detected between 1970 and 1990, and further range contraction and population decline has become evident since. As a result, the GWCT advises all those who wish to shoot woodcock to exercise particular care and improve their knowledge of local populations.

Residents and migrants

Britain and Ireland support a relatively small resident breeding population of woodcock. Counts of displaying males give us the best information on trends in our breeding woodcock and the current population estimate is 55,240 males. The European breeding population is estimated at 6-8 million males. In winter we see a large influx of migrant woodcock from the main European breeding grounds in Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Baltic States and Russia. Owing to the fact that woodcock feed primarily on soil invertebrates by probing, these birds are forced off their northern and eastern breeding grounds in autumn and have to migrate to warmer areas for the winter. Migrants typically arrive in all months from October to January, but the timing and numbers vary regionally within Britain and Ireland, as well as annually according to the severity of cold weather on the continent. We estimate that between 800,000 and 1.3 million migrant woodcock winter here, with most departing in March.

The decline in our resident population

Recent work by the GWCT and British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) shows a severe decline in the population size and breeding range of our resident woodcock since 1970. BTO Atlas data indicate that woodcock presence fell by 56% at the 10km square scale between 1970 and 2010. In randomised surveys across Britain in 2003 and 2013, funded by the GWCT, occupancy of 1km squares that contained at least 10ha of woodland dropped from 35% to 22%. The British population estimate fell by 29% from 78,350 males in 2003 to 55,240 males in 2013. Both data sources suggest regional variation in the rate of decline, with losses greatest in the west and south. Given the scale of the decline, we expect the woodcock to be moved from amber to red status on the UK's Birds of Conservation Concern listing this year.

We do not fully understand what is driving the decline in our breeding woodcock, but we expect there to be multiple factors involved and regional differences. It should be borne in mind that Britain and Ireland

represent the western limit of the woodcock's breeding range and that the species only became widely established as a breeding bird after the 1850s, with the large-scale planting of woodland, primarily for pheasant shooting. Changing climate and changes in the suitability and management of woodland might therefore be important. We are conducting further analysis of our datasets to examine patterns in the distribution of breeding woodcock with respect to these factors, as well as others potentially influencing the recent fall in numbers, such as predation, deer, recreational disturbance and shooting. Other ground-nesting wading birds in open habitats, such as the curlew and lapwing, are declining as a result of predation on eggs and chicks and high nest predation rates have recently been documented in some declining woodland songbirds. Increasing grazing pressure by the expanding numbers of deer may be affecting habitat quality for breeding woodcock in some UK regions. Increased recreational activity in spring and summer by people in woodland may be an issue because the woodcock is particularly susceptible to disturbance when nesting.

At present, we cannot rule out shooting as a factor contributing to the decline of our resident woodcock. We have commenced work to examine the effect of shooting on breeding woodcock numbers and produce guidance on sustainable harvest rates, but this is not yet complete.

Woodcock monitoring in the main European breeding areas indicates that the European population is stable and there is no evidence for a change in the numbers of migrant woodcock wintering in Britain and Ireland.

Reducing the impact of shooting on residents

We do not believe that a ban on woodcock shooting would help recover our resident woodcock, in the long term, for three reasons. First, there is an indication, at a national scale, of a reduction in hunting pressure over the last 20 years, with many people deciding voluntarily that they no longer wish to shoot woodcock. Second, a ban might remove the motivation for many landowners to manage their woods in ways that will maintain suitable habitat for woodcock. Third, parts of western Britain have no history of breeding woodcock, but host large numbers of migrants, so shooting in these areas does not put residents at risk except during cold spells when residents might move south and west[1].

However, until we better understand the reasons for the decline in our breeding woodcock and the effects of shooting, we believe it would be prudent for those that intend to shoot woodcock to:

1 – Improve their understanding of their local woodcock populations before shooting
We advocate improving local knowledge about both the presence of resident breeders and the numbers of woodcock typically present at different times during the winter. For instance, on the east coast of Scotland the largest numbers of migrant woodcock are often present in November, whereas in southern England migrant numbers are typically highest in January. Information on how to count residents in summer can be found here.

2 – Show restraint even where resident birds are absent
Restraint when shooting woodcock makes sense even in areas where there are no local breeders, because we know from our satellite tracking and annual ringing of woodcock that the majority of migrant woodcock are extremely faithful to the same wintering site year on year. Overshooting will therefore break the migratory link with your shoot and is likely to lead to fewer woodcock being seen in future.

3 – Shoot flight lines with caution
We urge local caution when shooting woodcock flighting from woodland at dusk owing to a higher risk of overshooting.

4 – Curb shooting in cold weather
We are currently conducting research to better understand the effect of cold weather on woodcock.

However, every effort should be made to reduce additional mortality when woodcock are at higher risk of starvation and predation during cold spells. We are aware that most shoots stop shooting woodcock before a statutory cold weather suspension comes into force after 13 days. Our current advice is that woodcock shooting should stop after seven days with daily temperatures below 0°C or with the onset of lying snow and that birds should be given a chance to recover for at least a week following such weather.

Footnotes

[1] Woodcock have historically never bred regularly in Cornwall, Pembrokeshire or the Outer Hebrides and hence, in mild weather, shooting should only affect migrants. Devon, Somerset, Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and Anglesey have supported only very low and localised numbers of breeding woodcock in the last 50 years and the risk of shooting to residents in these counties is currently low. Very few woodcock currently breed in Galway and Mayo, but the species bred far more widely in these counties until 20-30 years ago.