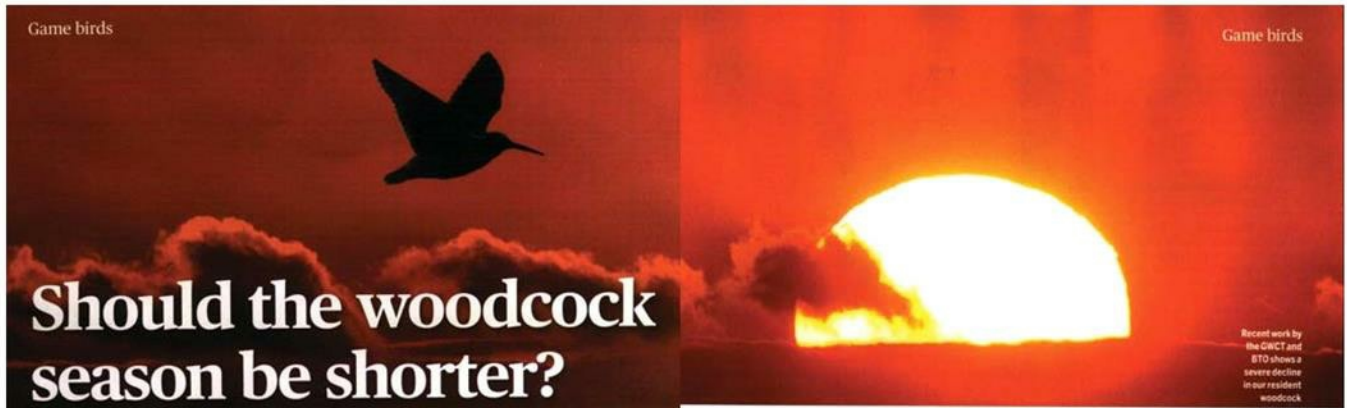




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Andrew Hoodless of the GWCT looks at ways in which shooters and conservationists could prevent impacts on our resident breeding birds

Our resident breeding woodcock are in decline and, inevitably, the question of whether or not to shoot them and what constitutes sustainable practice keeps coming up. At the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT), we are increasingly being approached for advice and I have recently been asked whether the woodcock season ought to be reduced to two months.

So, would woodcock populations fare better with greater statutory controls on shooting or might improved self-regulation by shoots be more effective?

Before discussing these options, let's establish some facts. The European breeding woodcock population is estimated at 7million to 9million males. In winter we see a large influx of migrant woodcock from the main breeding grounds in Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Baltic states and Russia. They arrive from October to January and we estimate that between 800,000 and 1.3million migrant woodcock typically winter in Britain and Ireland, with most departing in March. Monitoring in Scandinavia, Finland and Russia indicates that the European population is stable.

In Britain and Ireland, we also have a relatively small resident breeding population of woodcock. Recent work by the GWCT and British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) shows a severe decline in our resident woodcock, with a range contraction of 56 per cent between 1970 and 2010. Our population estimate, based on random surveys across Britain, fell by 29 per cent from 78,350 males in 2003 to 55,240 males in 2013, with

“Britain and Ireland represent the western limit of the woodcock’s breeding range”

losses greatest in the west and south. Owing to the scale of decline, the woodcock was moved to red status on the UK's Birds of Conservation Concern list in December 2015.

We don't fully understand what is driving this decline. It should be borne in mind that Britain and Ireland represent the western limit of the woodcock's global breeding range and that the species became widely established as a breeding bird only

after the 1850s, with the large-scale planting of woodland, primarily for pheasant shooting. The planting of conifer forests across Scotland, Wales and East Anglia in the 1950s and 1960s produced further extensive areas of ideal habitat and consequently our resident breeding population probably peaked around 1970.

An increasing trend in average woodland age and a reduction or cessation in woodland management might be important in the recent decline. The maturation of the conifers established in the 1950s and 1960s will have resulted in large areas of formerly suitable habitat being far less attractive to breeding woodcock.

At the same time, we have seen a significant growth in deer numbers, with many former deer-free areas colonised, which means more browsing of the herb and shrub layers that woodcock need. Predation pressure may well have risen too. We know that lowland areas, in particular, support higher densities of foxes and corvids than 50 years ago and, coupled with a growing population of badgers, increased predation becomes another plausible factor in the decline. It may well be that climate change is also significant too; drying of woodland soils may



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Roding woodcock

During the breeding season, male woodcock make roding flights over woodland at dawn and dusk in search of females while uttering a peculiar croak-and-whistle call. Some males may mate with more than one female, but counts of roding passes can be used to estimate abundance.

influence the abundance and accessibility of food for chicks.

Effects of shooting

Back to the question of shooting. At present, we cannot rule out shooting as a factor in the decline of our resident woodcock. We think that its contribution at a national scale is likely to be small, but it could be important at a local level. Until we better understand the reasons for the decline in our breeding woodcock and the effects of shooting, everyone should make efforts to avoid shooting residents wherever possible.

The GWCT currently advocates not shooting woodcock before 1 December, to give migrant woodcock numbers time to build up and hence minimise the chance of shooting a resident. So should the season be changed to December and January? An advantage would be



Guns are being urged to make efforts to avoid shooting resident woodcock wherever possible

that no woodcock would be shot in September (in Scotland) or October, when the majority killed are likely to be residents, and residents would also be protected in November while migrant numbers are building up.

The potential downside might be a belief among shooters that any detriment to resident woodcock had been addressed by the revised legislation and shooting pressure might increase during the shorter season. Some shoots in the east that often only see woodcock in November as migrant birds pass through would miss out on the chance to take a bag.

For self-regulation of shooting to be successful, it has to be based

on clear guidelines that are adopted by all. Coupled with active management to improve habitat and reduce predation, it can be highly effective, as demonstrated by the voluntary moratorium on the shooting of black grouse. This is why the GWCT has emphasised the importance of obtaining a good local understanding of woodcock numbers and of restraint when the decision is made to shoot.

Landowners and gamekeepers should make it their business to know whether woodcock are present in summer and which woods are used by local breeders. Watching from a ride in the largest wood at dusk on a couple of evenings in May or June ->



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Game birds

should be sufficient to detect roding males. In upland areas they can be seen over open moorland.

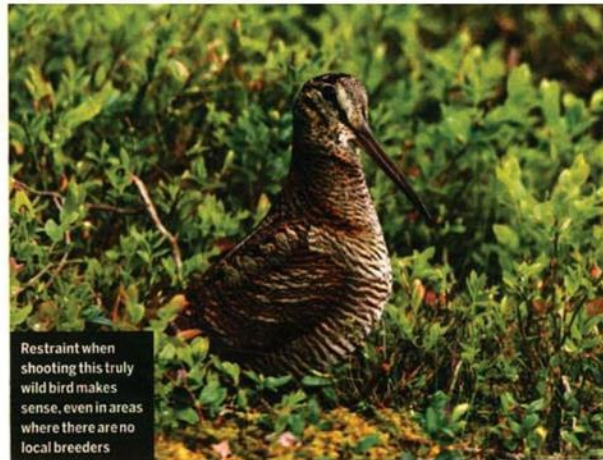
Counts of woodcock feeding on fields between October and December will soon make it clear when the migrant woodcock have arrived in good numbers.

Respect for this truly wild bird and restraint when shooting makes sense even in areas where there are no local breeders. Though ringing records indicate that most resident woodcock do not move more than a few miles from their breeding woods in winter, some Scottish birds move to Ireland. We also know from our satellite tracking and ringing of woodcock that about 70 per cent of migrant woodcock are faithful to the same wintering site year on year. Overshooting will probably break the migratory link with your shoot and may lead to fewer woodcock being seen in future.

For instance, allowing woodcock to be shot throughout the season on a commercial pheasant shoot is soon likely to lead to the extinction of any resident breeders and a reduction in numbers of migrants seen in future.

“Shooters might think that any detriment to resident woodcock had been addressed”

In contrast, a single woodcock day in January on a wild bird shoot may have no effect on breeding numbers. There is perhaps the greatest risk of overshooting when targeting woodcock flighting from woodland at dusk. This activity is best restricted to one or two evenings a season and only a small proportion of the birds seen should be taken.



Restraint when shooting this truly wild bird makes sense, even in areas where there are no local breeders

We are not alone in tackling the issue of how to ensure sustainable woodcock shooting. At the recent annual meeting of FANBPO (Federation of European Woodcock Associations of the Western Palearctic) there was concern about tourist hunters and commercial exploitation of woodcock. The flighting of woodcock was regarded as unsporting and condemned.

Though the numbers of woodcock shot in Britain and Ireland are seven to eight times lower than in Italy or France, where they are widely hunted over pointers and setters, we are in the unusual position of having no statutory monitoring of bags and no bag limits. The sale of woodcock is banned throughout the rest of Europe. I was encouraged that

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- ➔ Help the GWCT to understand the decline in resident woodcock and devise solutions by making a donation at www.gwct.org.uk/game/resident-woodcock-appeal.
- ➔ Help survey breeding woodcock: www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/woodcock-survey.
- ➔ Read more about the GWCT's research: www.gwct.org.uk/game/research/species/woodcock.

there was consensus on the need for better co-ordinated monitoring of winter woodcock numbers and bags between countries, a better understanding of the impact of cold weather and when to halt shooting and more work to determine what constitutes a sustainable harvest.

Prudent policy

Until we have better information, it would be prudent for all shoots to rethink their woodcock shooting policy. Shoots can also make an important contribution to habitat management for breeding woodcock. Ensuring diversity in woodland structure and creating open space is likely to help. Where the canopy is dense and there is little undergrowth, thinning is important to promote more ground cover. Making clearings to regenerate naturally, or for replanting, will create open space in the short term, followed by thickets for foraging areas. Rotational ride management will provide access to preferred stands and is likely to benefit warblers and butterflies too.



Shoots can make an important contribution to habitat management for breeding woodcock