



Thorndon Birdlife

March 2023

Early February I flushed a **Woodcock** (*Scolopax rusticola*) from my back garden, the same week my neighbour flushed two. The woodcocks are a group of seven or eight very similar living species of wader in the genus *Scolopax*. The genus name is Latin for a snipe or woodcock, and until around 1800 was used to refer to a variety of waders. The English name is first recorded in about 1050.



The woodcock has been hunted and eaten since Roman times. Its pin feathers (at the base of the leading primary on each wing) were used widely for various purposes including drawing the gold stripe down the side of a Rolls Royce.

Known as the 'Snipe of the Woods', woodcock is an elusive wading bird found mainly in woodlands, it has deserted open marshes and taken to damp woodland with open clearings and rides and a good growth of bracken and bramble. It is a thick-bodied, pigeon-sized bird with a long bill. Its beautiful plumage provides almost perfect camouflage when it is on the ground, motionless in leaf litter. Rarely seen on the ground, it is the rufous rump that is most striking when the bird is flushed into flight. It is a crepuscular bird, most active at dawn and dusk, it feeds by probing its bill into damp ground eating mainly earthworms, larvae and beetles.

The territorial display flight of the woodcock, called 'roding' is very distinctive. The male bird flies over its territory at dusk usually between April and June, covering a wide area on rapid-beating wings which belie its actual speed of flight, it overlaps with other males as they compete to attract the attention of females.

From time to time it utters two calls, a throaty 'og-og-og with the bill closed and a 'chee-wick' with the bill open. The first call is barely audible except at close range, but the second carries for a considerable distance. The woodcocks escape flight, when flushed from cover, is very different, it moves rapidly among the trees with deftly executed twists and turns.

Female woodcock have occasionally been seen carrying their young tucked between legs and body, often with the tail as additional support.

The nest is a leaf-lined scrape in the ground. The eggs, which are pale fawn speckled with brown and grey, take between 20 and 23 days to hatch. The chicks are tended by both parents and when danger threatens the parent birds usually squat and rely on their natural camouflage to prevent discovery.

The nocturnal habits and cryptic nature of this species makes it difficult to monitor the breeding population using the British Trust for Ornithology traditional survey methods. A special survey for woodcock has been devised, which uses the counts of the territorial roding flight, passes undertaken by males at dusk and dawn, to estimate the number of individual males present.

It is a widespread breeding bird in Britain and Ireland that is adapted to both deciduous and coniferous forest. In autumn there is an influx from the Continent, outnumbering the British and Irish population 5 to 1. During winter, it is estimated that up to 1.5 million individuals may be present in Britain and Ireland; mostly originating from northern Europe and western Russia. The current breeding range is less than half its 1960s extent, supporting other evidence of long term population decline. The reasons for the decline are unclear but may include recreational disturbance, drying out of woodlands, increased browsing by deer, declining woodland management and maturing of new plantations.

Garden sightings; Lots of Blackbirds, Common Buzzard, Woodcock x 2, Mistle Thrush, Song Thrush, Fieldfares, Redwings, Lesser Redpolls and a flock of 23 Long-tailed tits. Raven again along Thwaite Road.

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