

## Missing Woodcocks

Many birdwatchers have a special place where they go in times of stress, or just to enjoy being close to nature. One of my favourite places is the Tower Hide at Wicken Fen, in Cambridgeshire, at dusk. Perhaps I am especially attracted to it because the tower is of a similar age to me and still standing strong. The hide offers panoramic views across the Fen and can occasionally become crowded – especially in winter, when Hen Harriers *Circus cyaneus* patrol the reeds near the tower before roosting – so I try to avoid climbing up there on weekends. Even though I prefer to be there on my own, I have often shared memorable observations and great conversations with complete strangers in this hide. Sometimes, I take friends with me, especially those visiting from other countries, and in spring my prime target is to show them roding Woodcocks *Scolopax rusticola* at dusk. The Tower Hide is possibly unique in western Europe in that from it you can watch roding Woodcocks passing at eye level, uttering their weird ‘quorring’ calls. Each time I hear that high-pitched ‘psiek’, there is a pulse of excitement as I scan for the approaching bird. Only when it is close can you hear the quorring, which is accompanied by curious, jerky body movements, slightly arching, a sort of Woodcock hiccup! Sometimes the displaying male is pursued by another bird, presumably a female, when the ‘psiek’ calls are uttered more frequently. Several different males may be encountered in an evening, although precise numbers are difficult to determine as the roding males overlap in territory and cover a wide range for a long period at dusk.

Over the past 20 years, I have enjoyed between two and four roding Woodcocks from the Tower Hide on my spring visits and have not noticed any change in numbers. A view of a roding Woodcock at dusk was something I could reliably promise my visiting friends. Consequently, I was shocked when I did not find any Woodcocks at Wicken Fen last spring. Because of commitments elsewhere, I first visited Wicken rather late in 2016, in March. With my youngest

son, I climbed to the Tower Hide early in the evening. Perhaps we left the hide too soon, and I hoped that we had simply missed them; but on returning in mid April it became clear that there were no roding Woodcocks on that part of the Fen. Further visits in late April and in May confirmed their absence.

The missing Woodcocks brought a curious feeling of mourning, something I have never felt this strongly before. It was almost like losing a family member or a close friend and I resolved to search for an explanation. I know that Woodcock populations are declining steadily throughout the UK and even in many European countries (Lutz & Jensen 2005; BirdLife International 2015). The UK breeding population has declined by 30% in the past decade, to about 55,000 pairs, and the species’ range has contracted by more than 60% over the past 40 years (Heward *et al.* 2015). But surely Wicken Fen, England’s oldest Nature Reserve, would be a safe haven for them given that it is well managed and sufficiently wet for this special wader to breed and thrive?

The Woodcock eluded me for many years. Growing up in northern Germany, I rarely ventured into the realm of the Woodcock. I still remember, in the early 1970s, visiting some ancient woodland near my home town of Bremen. Two of my birding pals and I stayed at a youth hostel during the Easter vacation in order to visit the woodland, which we thought must be good for Woodcocks. Despite scanning the glades in the evenings, we never managed to find them. No-one was guiding us or available to tell us where to look, but it was still a great week off school, with many Black *Dryocopus martius* and Middle Spotted Woodpeckers *Dendropicus medius* and several encounters with Fire Salamanders *Salamandra salamandra*. Throughout the 1970s, my encounters with Woodcocks remained only as early spring or autumn migrants, most predominantly on Helgoland, where very large numbers were recorded up to the 1970s. Sadly, many were targeted by hunters – up to 1,000 birds shot

in a single day on 23rd March 1965 and 14th November 1977. Unsurprisingly, numbers there have declined ever since (Dierschke *et al.* 2011). Woodcocks are still hunted relentlessly, throughout Europe, and the numbers are staggering. In both France and Italy, more than one million Woodcocks are shot each year, and even in the UK the annual bag is 150,000 (Lutz & Jensen 2005). Millions of Russian and Scandinavian Woodcocks winter here. They often mix with our breeding birds, most of which winter in the UK or move to France and the near Continent, with equally uncertain chances of survival.

It was only when I came to Scotland, as a visiting scholar at Aberdeen University in 1981–82, that I finally found my first roding Woodcocks. I cycled all over Scotland and, wherever I pitched my tent, Woodcocks greeted me at dusk with their mysterious flight and weird calls. I quickly became used to the birds featuring regularly at my campsites, especially near Ballater, in North-east Scotland, and on the Isle of Mull, in Argyll. I began to appreciate the bird more and more, and I decided to follow Desmond Nethersole-Thompson's (1971) advice to adopt one's own special bird. His was the Green-shank *Tringa nebularia*. Rather subconsciously at first, but later more boldly, I chose the Woodcock. I became so familiar with Woodcocks that I heard them more often and wondered how many times I might previously have missed them in the German forests of my youth.

Globally, the Woodcock is still a common bird, it may even be the most abundant wader on the planet. Wetlands International (2006) estimated the global population in 2006 to be between 10 and 25 million, but the difference between the minimum and maximum numbers might suggest that those estimates are rather crude. In its recent assessment of European birds, BirdLife International (2015) estimated 7–9 million birds in Europe, of which 84% are in Russia. The long-term trend from this largest population is a decline of 5–30% (Blokhin & Fokin 2015). According to the EU Single Species Action Plan for the Woodcock (Lutz & Jensen 2005), the species has an unfavourable status in Europe, although many European countries do not

confirm the overall declining trend.

In the late 1980s, I worked in Poland and I was delighted to see Woodcocks again in good numbers. The wet fen mires surrounded by alder *Alnus* woodlands, or pine forest on sandy islands, seemed to have a great appeal for Woodcocks and to my delight they were roding in numbers above wide open areas of the Biebrza Marshes, but also in Białowieża and many other places in eastern Poland. Moving farther east and birding in European Russia in the mid 1990s and 2000s, I also found Woodcocks at densities to remind me of the old days in Scotland.

In early April 2016, I returned to Scotland with my pal Ian and we revisited some of the sites we had cycled to in 1982. I was confident that we would find a Woodcock at any of our previous campsites. Even though we were no longer camping and preferred the comfort of B&Bs and hostels, we managed to be out at dusk in suitable areas. But no Woodcocks emerged as the light faded and, sadly, they no longer accompanied us whenever we stopped.

Back at Wicken, I began to ask fellow bird-watchers for sightings of Woodcocks in spring 2016, but no-one seemed to have seen any. The records of birds seen in early March were most likely to have been birds on passage. I searched at other places nearby and found Woodcocks at two different sites. At Chippenham Fen, on the Cambridgeshire/Suffolk border, they were still present in good numbers. Natural England kindly invited me to come along to their annual coordinated multi-point survey of roding Woodcocks in late May. Despite the rather cool weather, we had over 40 encounters in two hours at one single point, often seeing two birds together – a roding male with a female in pursuit. It seems that this fen is still home to a viable population of 12–13 roding birds, which is great news and more than a comfort to me. But it leaves me even more puzzled over what has happened at Wicken.

The fact that Chippenham Fen has so many roding birds hints that hunting may not be (solely) to blame. The National Trust's site manager kindly gave me a complete guided tour of Wicken Fen at dusk. He explained the different management schemes and his detailed knowledge of the site gave

me a much clearer understanding of the complexities of managing England's oldest nature reserve. He too is deeply concerned about the missing Woodcocks. We discussed recent management activities and possible factors that might account for the disappearing birds. To my mind, there might have been a little too much cutting back of the woodland, while some of the brash is left to rot on the ground, which might not be good for ground-nesting birds. The Woodcocks at Wicken prefer the shrubby areas rather than the taller woodland for nesting according to those few who found nests back in the 1970s (Thorne & Bennett 1982). This type of management has been ongoing for many years – might it now be taking its toll? Yet the Woodcock's decline was so sudden. What about deer? The deer may have gradually altered the habitat since the numbers of Muntjacs *Muntiacus reevesi* especially have increased and are not controlled, as they are at Chippenham Fen. Yet it strikes me as unlikely that (admittedly fast-growing) deer populations could have caused such a sudden decline. Another issue at Wicken is an increase in water levels, which occurred only a few years ago and no-one seems to know why. But again, I cannot imagine that higher water levels could harm the Woodcock breeding population, and they may in fact even be beneficial. There are still so many unanswered questions and I can only begin to understand what is going on. It feels as though I am in the middle of a murder investigation: several witnesses have been interviewed, there are more to come but still no prime suspect.

This is not an obituary, like those others have written when dealing with far more threatened birds. But this silent spring at Wicken Fen has been a wake-up call, a call for greater awareness of one of our disappearing waders and a call for action. The Woodcock might indeed be one of the most common waders in the world, but we have seen other very common waders, like the Eskimo Curlew *Numenius borealis*, disappearing rapidly and becoming extinct. I am not

suggesting that the Woodcock is in danger of following that perilous path. Most of the research on the decline of the Woodcock is, not surprisingly, funded by the shooting fraternity. However, when common birds are declining, or disappearing gradually, this process is perhaps less obvious to hunters or to the wider public. Even though the hunters are probably not the only ones to blame for the missing Woodcocks, I feel that it is surely no longer acceptable to continue hunting this amazing bird. A recent (yes, another) petition on hunting is gathering momentum, at <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/167410> (see also p. 648). Who would want to shoot a European Golden Plover *Pluvialis apricaria*, a Common Snipe *Gallinago gallinago* or a Woodcock?

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