The Future of Woodcock

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ABSTRACT: We welcome you to Roscommon, Michigan for this 2017 symposium. What a prime location to host a meeting of this caliber and to expand partnerships for this unique bird. It is crucial that we work together to conduct research and exchange information at meetings like this. Many people helped to make this symposium a reality and we thank all the committee members for their contributions. We especially thank symposium chairs for their diligence and leadership. Since the last symposium, in 2006, there has been considerable work in woodcock research, management, and conservation. Collectively, these efforts have helped to arrest the decade-long downward trend in woodcock populations. We continue to be optimistic about the outlook for woodcock. We believe that substantive long-range strategic planning and expanded partnerships will be key to improving the status of American woodcock in the future.

Russ Mason

In Michigan, there is strong interest in woodcock management. In this state, approximately 24,000–35,000 hunters harvest 64,000–100,000 birds each fall and spend over 107,000 days afield. This is down from the 1976 record harvest of 390,000 woodcock harvested by 126,000 hunters spending 908,000 days afield. Federal surveys continue to show that Michigan is still the number one state in the country for American woodcock harvest and one of the top production states. Nationally, nearly 400,000 days afield are spent pursuing woodcock, and the harvest exceeds 202,000 birds.

Despite the strong interest in woodcock conservation and woodcock hunting in Michigan, there are troubling trends in hunting participation and conservation funding both here and across the country that present significant challenges. Canadian wildlife biologist and noted conservationist Shane Mahoney makes three points about the decline of hunting and the problem this poses for the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation: 1) there are too few of us who care, 2) those who do care are too sectarian, and 3) we are running out of money to fund the work.

In Michigan, we have lost 50% of our small game hunters in the past 12 years. Over that time the number of deer (*Odocoileus* spp.) hunters has declined 2–3% per year, and they are very sectarian—Michigan deer hunters hunt about 4 days per year, harvest 2.2 deer per year, and have *little to no interest* in any other hunting. This is a problem as they become the primary hunting demographic in the state. In a survey of Michigan residents, 80% say they enjoy the outdoors, but when asked to identify their primary outdoor activity, 90% say they walk their dog. How do you leverage that response into wildlife work? The challenge for funding wildlife conservation is to find new and creative ways to broaden the financial base of active support.

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The reach of American woodcock management exceeds helping this unique upland bird that uses thick young forests. Creating young forest for woodcock directly benefits more than 60 kinds of wildlife considered to be Species of Greatest Conservation Need by states within the woodcock range.

The North American Woodcock Conservation Plan, written to help guide woodcock management in each region of the continent, has provided focus for future management. As we move forward with the plan, it will be important to integrate the relationship between harvest and habitat management. It will also be critical to develop the metrics needed to understand and manage woodcock populations by working through the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' (AFWA) Migratory Shore and Upland Game Bird Support Task Force and the separate AFWA Woodcock Task Force in association with joint-venture partnerships. The *Priority Information Needs for American Woodcock, A Funding Strategy* document has also been useful in directing our future focus for woodcock conservation.

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John Eichinger

In 2015, the Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS) announced the formation of a sister organization called the American Woodcock Society. The purpose of this new forest conservation organization is to enhance and increase young forest conservation efforts and upland hunting opportunities nationwide, with a special emphasis on American woodcock (*Scolopax minor*; hereafter, woodcock). However, our commitment to the conservation of woodcock began with the formation of the Ruffed Grouse Society back in 1961. The RGS Bylaws and the RGS Mission Statement have long recognized the connection between ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*), American woodcock, and other wildlife that require young forests for survival.

Today, at the American Woodcock Society and Ruffed Grouse Society, we are optimistic about the future of woodcock conservation. Our optimism is based on 3 major factors: *the bird's inherent adaptability*, a *strong foundation of research*—exemplified by these Woodcock Symposia—from which to go forward, and an upward trend in *recognition of the importance of young forests* and in the resolve to manage for young forests as part of a balanced forest landscape.

First, the bird. Woodcock respond positively and quickly to habitat management—you build it, and they will come. As a migratory species that requires disturbance to create its habitat, woodcock are able to find and inhabit new suitable habitat patches as they become suitable. Despite stochastic events such as late spring snowstorms or summer drought that may cause short-term population declines, they always seem to bounce back

within a few years, given availability of good habitat. And fortunately, when they occupy an area, we have a pretty good ability to detect them and monitor their populations.

The *solid foundation of research dates* back to the 1930s with the establishment of Moosehorn National Wildlife Refuge in Maine and with Howard Mendall's work there and elsewhere in the state, early capture and banding work in Pennsylvania and Louisiana, and continued research efforts to the present day elsewhere across the major breeding and wintering ranges. These essential works, many of which have been presented at the Woodcock Workshops and Symposia since 1966, have informed us on the natural history of woodcock, the management necessary to provide high quality habitat, the survival and movements of woodcock in relation to hunting, and, more recently—and currently—migration ecology and the identification of potentially important stopover areas along migratory flight paths.

It is evident there is an expanding *awareness of the importance of young forest* in wildlife conservation and *appreciation of the woodcock among upland bird hunters* and the non-hunting public. The positive trend in appreciation of the importance of young forests for woodcock and many other species of wildlife is evidenced by the numerous state and regional young forest initiatives that have formed for the purpose of conserving the many young-forest-dependent species considered SGCN—species of greatest conservation need—in state conservation plans.

The genesis for these young forest initiatives is the American Woodcock Conservation Plan, a collaborative effort of many of you here today, headed up by the Wildlife Management Institute. Next, the Northern Forest Woodcock Initiative was developed to begin implementing the Woodcock Plan objectives. The Woodcock Initiative morphed into the Young Forest Project, and "young forest initiatives" were developed by conservation partners in several bird conservation regions, including the Northern Young Forest Initiative and the Upper Great Lakes Young Forest Initiative, to name but 2, and by state-specific initiatives, for example in Wisconsin and New York. This is truly collaborative conservation that benefits a multitude of species. Clearly, the early stages of forest growth are very important to the overall health of the forest landscape, and this connection to forest health needs to be a key part of our messaging to gain support from the general public for forest management.

Just as rust never sleeps, young forests continue to grow and mature and become less suitable as habitat for early successional forest species such as American woodcock. Woodcock habitat is short-lived, losing suitability within perhaps 15 years of the treatment or disturbance that created the forest opening. Additionally, the forest environment is not a steady state; we experience loss or major reductions in tree species such as American elm (Ulmus americana), and more recently ash (Fraxinus spp.), or the confounding effects of introduced invasive species. Variation in precipitation certainly affects availability of prey of woodcock. And land-use, such as forestry, agriculture, and residential or industrial development, changes based on societal demands. As woodcock habitat requires periodic treatment, so our mission will always continue, working with many municipal, state, university, federal, industrial forest, NGO, and private individual conservation partners.