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# Evidence of American Woodcock Nesting in Southeastern South Dakota

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**EVIDENCE OF AMERICAN WOODCOCK NESTING IN SOUTHEASTERN NORTH DAKOTA** -- The western limit of confirmed breeding by American woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) includes western Minnesota (Janssen 1987) and eastern portions of Manitoba, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas (Keppie and Whiting 1994, Peterson 1995). Although breeding is suspected (Keppie and Whiting 1994, Stewart 1975), North Dakota remains the only state within the species' presumed breeding range that lacks a published nest record (Keppie and Whiting 1994). The only account we have found is a second-hand report by Faanes and Andrew (1983) of an observation by J. L. Piehl in Ransom County during 1979.

Generally, breeding-season observations of American woodcock in North Dakota have been considered noteworthy. Stewart (1975) compiled reports of two unconfirmed instances of breeding prior to 1923. He also reported observations of American woodcock during the breeding seasons of 1923, 1934, 1957, 1969, and 1972 and that a courtship territory was occupied by a displaying male in 1971 and 1972. Smith and Barclay (1978) surveyed individuals in wildlife agencies, universities, and ornithological societies for reports of breeding by American woodcock and obtained four reports of courtship displays in North Dakota, but none of nesting. Faanes and Andrew (1983) banded a male in 1981 and described it as the eleventh breeding-season record for the state.

We observed at least nine American woodcock, including a female with two chicks, in southeastern North Dakota during spring 1998. Our first observation was on the margin of riparian woodland at Clausen Springs (46° 40' 5" N, 98° 2' 41" W) in Barnes County, where we observed at least two males performing courtship displays at dusk on 12 April. Later, on May 10, while walking through a 65-ha area of quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) parkland on the Sheyenne National Grasslands (46° 26' 43" N, 97° 24' 32" W) in Ransom County, we flushed American woodcock from seven locations (two birds at each of two locations; single birds at four locations; and a female with two fully feathered chicks approximately two-thirds grown). Based on locations of flushes, flight paths of departing birds, and the brevity of our visit (~1 h), we suspect the latter observation involved at least five and possibly as many as nine American woodcock. On 20 May 2000 we searched the Sheyenne Grasslands site a second time. We flushed only one American woodcock and found another dead on the adjacent shoulder of North Dakota Highway 27.

Although our observations are inconsistent with published reports, which suggest American woodcock occurs only occasionally in southeastern North Dakota (Stewart 1975, Smith and Barclay 1978, Faanes and Andrew 1983), they do not necessarily indicate a change in distribution or local abundance. None of the reports has been published, but local residents have reported frequent sightings of adults and occasional broods in Ransom County during recent years, especially along the Sheyenne River and in aspen parkland on the Sheyenne National Grasslands (B. L. Stotts, pers. comm.).

American woodcock are inconspicuous and could easily have escaped notice because the extent of suitable habitat in southeastern North Dakota is quite limited.

If our observations do reflect changes in distribution or local abundance, as postulated by Smith and Barclay (1978), woodland development in southeastern North Dakota (Haugen et al. 1994) could be a contributing factor. Tree plantings and invasions of woody species have provided suitable habitat for numerous species that were rare or absent from the Great Plains prior to European settlement (Knopf 1994). Unusually cool and wet weather during 1993 through 1998 (U.S. Geological Survey 1999) could also be involved. Soil moisture influences habitat use by American woodcock (Sepik et al. 1983) and the reported western border of breeding in eastern Minnesota corresponds with an isocline of a longitudinal precipitation gradient.

Based on courtship displays observed during 24 April to 11 May, Smith and Barclay (1978) postulated that American woodcock in North Dakota should initiate nesting in late April. We observed displays nearly two weeks earlier, and the development and behavior of chicks we observed on 10 May were consistent with an age of about 14 d (Johnsgard 1975). Thus, egg-laying was initiated about 2 April, incubation began about four days later, and hatching occurred about 26 April, 20 to 21 days after incubation began (Johnsgard 1975). Courtship displays might thus be observed as early as late March, although recommended survey dates for the latitudes of southeastern North Dakota are presently 1 to 20 May (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Migratory Bird Management, Form 3-156, 1998).

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