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12-2019

**Review of *Sky Dance of the Woodcock: The Habits and Habitats of a Strange Little Bird*, by Greg Hoch**

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## BOOK REVIEWS

### **SKY DANCE OF THE WOODCOCK: THE HABITS AND HABITATS OF A STRANGE LITTLE BIRD.**

Greg Hoch. 2019. University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, Iowa, USA. 174 pages. \$30.00 (paper). ISBN: 978-1-60938-627-6.

American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) have enthralled conservationists (including Aldo Leopold), bird watchers, wildlife enthusiasts, hunters, and others interested in the natural world for centuries. No doubt, woodcock also have enthralled humans in North America for millennia prior to written descriptions of the woodcock's courtship displays, habitat preferences, and curious behavior and anatomy. As perhaps the most extensively studied species of shorebird in the world, there is a rich and extensive literature, both scientific and popular, focused on woodcock ecology, behavior, and hunting. To that extensive body of literature, *Sky Dance of the Woodcock* provides an updated summary of their natural history, habitat relations, and conservation.

*Sky Dance of the Woodcock* takes its title from the courtship display of male woodcock, which consists of an elaborate aerial flight incorporating sound produced both vocally and mechanically via highly modified flight feathers. The aerial displays are accompanied by similarly unusual behavior on the ground, including a distinctive 'peent' call. This courtship display happens across much of eastern North America each spring, and Hoch uses this wonder to capture the imagination of the readers of his text. Hoch begins the book with an overview of some of the mystery and fascination surrounding woodcock and builds from that opening to describe woodcock anatomy, natural history, and behavior, before describing their courtship display in greater detail. From there, Hoch describes woodcock-habitat relations, provides a historical overview of woodcock hunting, identifies current threats to woodcock populations, summarizes past and recent woodcock research, and finally, presents an updated overview of woodcock conservation and habitat management. Throughout, there is sometimes surprising information about things as simple as what woodcock eat, to more complex assessment of how woodcock use landscapes and migrate to and from spring and summer breeding areas.

In some respects, *Sky Dance of the Woodcock* is an update of Sheldon's (1967) classic *Book of the American Woodcock* that incorporates considerable new information about woodcock ecology and conservation generated since that book was published. As with Sheldon's (1967) book,

*Sky Dance of the Woodcock* is geared toward a broad audience and is not directed solely at a scientific audience. As such, it is a mix of old and new science, past and current fascination with woodcock, and suggestions for managing woodcock habitat. It is heavily annotated with quotations from both the scientific and popular literature on woodcock and, as a result, provides an extensive reference to pertinent scientific and popular literature. The book includes 19 gray-scale figures that include photographs of woodcock nests, chicks, and feathers and graphs illustrating cover-type distribution, trends in American Woodcock Singing-Ground Survey data, and woodcock harvest estimates. The book clearly conveys Hoch's fascination and enchantment with woodcock, and he does his best to impart his enthusiasm throughout.

Overall, *Sky Dance of the Woodcock* is a comprehensive overview of woodcock ecology, conservation, and summary of the fascination of woodcock from both a popular and scientific perspective. It is a quick read, although the extensive quotations are sometimes distracting, and I sometimes found the writing to transition abruptly. I also found Hoch's terminology around woodcock habitat and land-cover types continued the confusion described by Hall et al. (1997), and I think that Hoch missed an opportunity to help clarify the concept of habitat as it relates to woodcock, especially to a general audience. From a scientific and ecological perspective, the term "habitat" refers to the biotic and abiotic factors that influence occupancy by a particular species (woodcock, in this instance), and does not refer to land cover or the vegetation community that occurs in a particular place. In that context, it makes sense to discuss woodcock breeding or migration habitat and early successional forest cover types, but not early successional forest "habitat". Although a minor issue, there is also an error related to determining woodcock age based on wing characteristics, i.e., describing the pattern of mottling on feathers in adult woodcock as symmetric on both sides of the rachis when it is asymmetric. However, these considerations do not detract significantly from the book.

As with any book that attempts to summarize existing knowledge about a particular topic, the summary is often outdated before it is published. In the case of *Sky Dance of the Woodcock*, Hoch was unable to incorporate information from the most recent 11th American Woodcock Symposium, the proceedings of which are currently published online (Krementz et al. 2019). Having access to the information contained in those symposium proceedings would have

provided the opportunity to incorporate results of some of the most recent woodcock research, but that information can be freely accessed electronically by readers interested in finding out more about woodcock and their habits and habitats. What will be missing is Hoch's opportunity to incorporate that information into the larger picture that he paints.

This book will undoubtedly appeal to woodcock enthusiasts of a variety to stripes. Woodcock hunters and bird watchers alike will learn something about woodcock-habitat relations, behavior, and conservation. Professional biologists and researchers will benefit from Hoch's synthesis of a wide range of information about woodcock, and landowners and managers can use some of the concepts in this book to inform their decisions about how to manage lands under their control. Along the way, everyone who reads *Sky Dance of the Woodcock* is likely to come away with an enhanced appreciation of this captivating bird.—  
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