



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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WOODCOCKS IN PRECARIOUS POSITION, REPORTS INDICATE

The woodcock, mystery game bird of the Atlantic States and the lower Mississippi Valley, apparently has not yet recovered from its severe losses during the unusually cold weather in the South last winter, according to a preliminary report from Fish and Wildlife Service investigators submitted to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes today.

From Maine, Clarence M. Aldous, leader of the Maine Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, reports that a check in the heart of the woodcock nesting areas showed the number of occupied singing grounds this year to be 37-1/2 percent less than the number used last year. In Pennsylvania, Dr. Logan J. Bennett, leader of the Pennsylvania Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit, who has been investigating the woodcock nesting area near the Pennsylvania State College, observed a decrease of 40 percent in the number of occupied singing grounds.

Observers from other sections of the country reported similar decreases in the woodcock populations during the spring migrations this year. Six observers found slight increases, however, showing the situation to be spotty.

From the Maritime Provinces, Harold L. Peters, Atlantic Flyway biologist of the Fish and Wildlife Service, found conflicting evidence, reporting no changes in some areas, slight decreases in others, and marked decreases in still other areas. He was of the opinion that the woodcock population is below normal.

Reports Conflict: Outlook Poor

Officials of the Fish and Wildlife Service frankly admit that there is much to be learned about the woodcock. Efforts to study the life history, and status of the bird have been made difficult by the fact that the woodcock is not easily banded. However, developments in banding techniques at the Maine and Pennsylvania Cooperative Wildlife Research Units during the past few years have been successful and more information on the bird is now being gathered.

The cooperative research units are financially supported by the University of Maine, the Maine Commission of Inland Fisheries and Game, the Pennsylvania State College, the Pennsylvania Game Commission, the American Wildlife Institute, and the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Though preliminary reports on the woodcock population, based on observations of spring migrations and nesting areas, are conflicting, Fish and Wildlife Service officials are inclined to believe that the number of birds this year is less than the 1939 population. This opinion is based on the numerous observations of reductions on the singing grounds and on the fact that an unusual number of woodcocks were killed in the South last winter.

Thousands Killed in Winter

Available information unquestionably shows that the majority of the woodcocks in the country winter in the Louisiana swamps, and officials of the Fish and Wildlife Service estimate that thousands of birds were destroyed there during the cold spell.

It will be recalled that last winter Louisiana and other southern States suffered a severe freeze-up. Considerable numbers of woodcocks were found starving on the southern end of their normal wintering grounds. According to reliable

sources, many individuals daily, shot full bag limits of these birds that were too weak to fly out of range of the hunters' guns. Usually, many hunters do not get full bag limits daily.

Want Shorter Season

E. A. MacIlheny, well-known conservationist and bird bander of Avery Island, Louisiana, asserts that following the freeze-up he counted 1,011 dying woodcocks within an hour and a half. Other investigators in the South reported substantially the same condition.

Since the woodcock is the mystery bird of the Atlantic seaboard and is a popular species among sportsmen, many individuals are of the opinion that the Federal authorities should "play safe" by recommending a shorter season and thus assuring protection for the breeding stock.

What action will be taken, however, to protect this year's supply of woodcocks from becoming depleted will not be known until the 1940 migratory hunting regulations are announced late in July.