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WOODCOCK, MYSTERY GAME BIRD, BEING
BANDED AND STUDIED BY SHREWD SCIENTISTS

Considerable progress has been made in the study of the woodcock, hitherto the mystery game bird of the Eastern United States, the Bureau of Biological Survey reported today. Investigators of the Maine and Pennsylvania Cooperative Wildlife Research Units have devised banding, censusing and singing ground techniques that are answering some of the questions that have puzzled observers for years. Up to this time, the bird has defied efforts of scientists who attempted to learn details of its life history, seasonal movements and migration routes.

The two units are sponsored cooperatively 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 Biological Survey.

In the last three years, the two units have banded almost 500 woodcocks, have observed the courtship and mating behavior of the birds on more than 20 singing grounds, and have taken censuses on some 25 sampling areas.

But even when the investigators solved the puzzle of how to band the bird and learn more about it, the woodcock continued to perplex the wildlife experts

by reacting differently to the same methods in Maine and Pennsylvania. In Maine, flashlights and nets are used successfully to catch an adult for banding purposes: In Pennsylvania, this method fails. In the Keystone State, a special trap is used to catch the adult: In Maine, the trap does not work.

Banding Woodcock Difficult

Unlike most other species of migratory birds, the woodcock has not been easy to band. Scientists declare that it is difficult to decoy a woodcock into a trap because it does not come to bait, as do most other species. Without a numbered band on its leg, the woodcock cannot be traced during migration flights nor can its seasonal movements be studied. Knowledge of both these factors is important for successful management and protection of the bird.

Three years ago, the Maine Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit began a series of studies on woodcock areas on the Moosehorn National Wildlife Refuge, near Calais. Unit leader C. M. Aldous and his assistant, Howard Mendall, of the University of Maine, selected sample areas. Crews of CCC, NYA, and WPA workers inspect every foot of ground on these areas. In this way, the number of woodcocks is counted—this information is important to indicate population trends—and females on the nest are found.

When a woodcock nest is found, its location is mapped and the investigators return later to find and band the young that are hatched. The crews in Maine banded 2 juveniles in 1936; 81 in 1937; 78 in 1938; 130 in 1939; and at least 170 in 1940; or an aggregate of more than 461 young.

Maine investigators also have made extensive use of trained dogs that scent the female with the brood, point, and then flush the adult. Observers go to the spot from which the female flushes and band the young that are found.

Devise Method by Accident

The Pennsylvania Unit, located at Pennsylvania State College, has had little success in catching adults with flashlights and fish dip nets. It has, however, devised a trap that was used to band 18 adults in 1939 and 12 adults this year. In 1941 the unit expects to begin banding juveniles also.

Graduate students of the Pennsylvania unit, who are directed by Unit leader Logan J. Bennett and his assistant Dr. P. F. English of the State College, devised the banding trap by accident. The students placed a male decoy in the center of a singing field to observe the reactions of the occupants to an intruding male. Instead of seeing a fight, which they expected, the students saw a male approach the stuffed decoy and attempt to court it.

Similar experience with decoys and males on the singing grounds led to experiments in trapping, from which the present trap evolved. Now, a woodcock decoy is placed in the center of a large one-quarter inch mesh, dark-green gill netting at one end of which is a closing device and a cord that leads to the observer hidden in a nearby blind. When a male reaches the decoy, the observer pulls the cord, and the net closes over the live bird.

According to reports, the trapped bird is easily banded and is not frightened by the trap. Observers often see a banded bird return to the place where he was trapped within five minutes after being released.

From banding and census studies investigators can more easily observe the population trends of the birds, their habits, and something about their life history. Perhaps the life of the mystery bird of eastern United States will some day be an open book with few missing pages. At least scientists are hopeful.