

8/31/76

Natural History Notes



MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is presently a staff member of the University of Minnesota's Bell Museum of Natural History. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.



THE TIMBER DOODLE



The mysterious and elusive "timber doodle" is a bird man knows little about. The woodcock is rarely seen and flies, in its fluttering fashion, between the hours of dusk and dawn. It is the only member of the shorebird family that has left the semi-aquatic habitat to live in moist uplands.

The woodcock winters in Louisiana and other parts of the South. Its migration north to Wisconsin and Southern Canada begins in early spring, and it is the first bird to nest here in the spring. Its courtship procedures are very complicated and colorful. The males sing every morning and evening during their migration north. When they finally arrive on their nesting grounds they set up territories and the singing continues with the hope of attracting a mate. At dusk and dawn the male sings his "twittering" song and about every five minutes takes off in his ritualistic zig-zag spiral flight. Each flight takes him higher into the sky. He tumbles back to earth singing and lands exactly on his own territory. This flight takes place several times and each time he tumbles down to the same spot. Attracted by his display the female flies to meet him upon his return to his territory. A well camouflaged nest is built and three or four brownish colored eggs are laid. The downy young hatch after an incubation period of about 21 days.

Woodcocks commonly inhabit moist dense forests along the edges of beaver ponds, lakes, and streams. Its brownish color pattern closely resembles a dead leaf and conceals it from predators very well. Earthworms are its principal food, although insects are often included in its diet. Its stout bill enables it to probe the moist ground in search of earthworms. Since earthworms require damp soil they will be found closer to water during dry parts of the season and the woodcock follows its food. These probing holes are easy to locate and are evidence of a woodcock near by.

Migration south occurs in October and at this time flocks of 50 or more may be seen. The woodcock gradually makes its way south at a flight speed of about 13 mph. They are a popular game bird and their fluttering flight patterns give the hunter a real challenge. The meat is dark and tasty, and an adult bird rarely weighs over 8 ounces.

The "timber doodle" can be seen here in Sawyer County along streams and lakes in dense cover, but you must remain quiet and alert to get a glimpse of him.



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