



Woodcock and the Silly Walk

Because woodcocks are uncommon, spend most of their time in damp thickets, and are virtually invisible against a background of leaf litter, they are seldom seen, which is a shame because they are so peculiar. These plump-bodied birds have long bills that they use to probe the soil for worms and other invertebrate prey. Their large eyes, located high on the head and to the back, provide an almost 360° visual field. This feature offers some measure of security when they are searching for worms. As if to make up for the excess of beak and eye, the bird has short legs and a short tail.

This time of year, woodcocks are engaged in courtship. At dusk, males claim a patch of open ground in a field as their performance space. Courtship has two components. First, the males sing while pivoting slowly. Their song, a nasal “peent” issued at two-second intervals, may not sound like music to our ears, but to a female woodcock —ooh la LA! After several turns on the stage, the acrobatic portion of the performance commences. The male launches skyward with whistling wings and flies in upward spirals. He then makes a musical twittering sound as he drops back to the stage. The performance is repeated until the woodcock deems it too dark. They are easy to find. Head to a field at dusk and listen.

The only other times I have seen woodcocks, they were in places where their camouflage failed them—several times in the middle of roads and once on a neighbor’s concrete deck. Each time they were engaged in a behavior that is easier to demonstrate than describe. However, I’ll give it a shot: Taking a step forward, the bird holds its head perfectly still while dipping the rest of its body forward and back several times. The bird then takes another step and repeats. Let’s call this a rock/bob. Think Elvis. Given the somewhat suggestive motion, I have always assumed that this strut must be what the woodcock is doing while turning on his stage.

In a world rife with “alternate facts,” I have become more rigorous with my own fact-checking. I began to wonder about the rock/bob. I headed to YouTube. None of the videos of woodcock courtship showed males rock/bobbing between peents. The articles I could find on the topic were intriguing but inconclusive. My favorite hypothesis is that the woodcock strut entices worms to come to the surface by mimicking the sound of a burrowing mole. Human “worm charmers” gather fishing bait by scraping a rasp against a stick or garden fork stuck in the earth. Similarly, gulls feed on worms that rise when they patter their feet on the ground. A scientific study of worm charming found that worms come above ground when they sense the approach of a mole (though NOT falling rain, a counter-hy-



pothesis). Could this be why woodcocks strut?

Or perhaps, the woodcocks' strut causes worms to move and betray their presence or allows the bird to better feel the soil vibrations of moving prey. Biologist Bernd Heinrich thinks that the strut informs predators that the bird is alert and about to fly, so any attack would be fruitless. Such a display would be used in situations where the threat was low and would allow the bird to save energy by not taking wing.

With these hypotheses in mind, I returned to YouTube to watch some woodcock rock/bobbing. Did they engage in this behavior while feeding? When they weren't feeding? Yes to both. There is even very charming footage of a mother woodcock and her chicks foraging, all of them rock/bobbing away. In only one video did it seem that the bird was not aware that a "predator" was watching. So what is this silly walk about? I am happy to say that I don't know, but I wonder! More observations are needed. Does bobbing enhance feeding success? Does it deter a fox from pouncing? If you still can't picture what the rock/bob looks like, ask me for a demonstration next time you see me in town. Just don't expect me to tell you why they do it.