



Wyre Forest Study Group

A WYRE FOREST WOODCOCK

Neville Wilde

Of all the ground nesting species of birds the woodcock probably has the finest camouflage and the greatest faith in its own invisibility when incubating. In the Wyre Forest several areas are suitable as nesting territory for woodcock. One of these is an area I study in detail, and observation of the woodcock's roding flights suggest that at least four pairs nest each year. I have carried out systematic searches of the sites in this area where I know woodcock are likely to nest but have never been able to find an occupied nest.

Woodcock nest early in the year, laying the eggs of the first brood in March. My search this year was again fruitless and was abandoned after the second week in May. During the search I had disturbed or "put up" woodcock seven or eight times but after a careful search had revealed no nest I felt sure that these were male birds roosting during the day and waiting for evening to come before commencing their feeding activities. The usual nest site chosen by woodcock is at the edge of a piece of open woodland where a "scrape" lined with leaves is made near the foot of an immature tree which has a small amount of bracken or other low ground vegetation around it. Birch and oak are favourite trees especially where they grow together. The nest site is normally in a dry part of the wood but is rarely far away from wet boggy areas where food is both abundant and accessible.

Because of the difficulty in locating the nests of some of the forest birds, I have made a point of asking friends to let me know if they find any nests during their day-to-day activities in the forest. When I visited the forest on 27 May I was greeted by the forester, George Horton, with the news that his daughter Julie, who had been working in the forest, had discovered a woodcock's nest. At this date incubation of a second brood would be well advanced. A selection of trees were being felled during a thinning operation and one of these had fallen so close to the sitting bird that it had taken fright and flown. Up till the moment this particular tree fell, the bird had been sitting tight even though trees were being felled a few yards from it. Having seen the woodcock get up, Miss Horton located the nest and marked it with a piece of timber. Further disturbance of the nest was avoided and the bird returned to the clutch of four eggs. I was taken to the site by George Horton, but even when the bird was pointed out only twenty feet away I could still not recognise what I was seeing as a bird. By moving a few feet to one side the woodcock's eye, which had been obscured by a leaf, became visible to me and with this single feature to focus the attention the whole bird became apparent.

The nest was among bilberry, ground ivy and fallen oak leaves and was in a typical situation at the edge of a wood not far from a Forestry Commission road which was used as a public footpath. This meant that a hide could not be erected because being easily visible from this footpath it would draw the attention of anyone walking along the path and would, through curiosity, inevitably lead to disturbance of the nest and eventual desertion.

Fortunately, once the eggs are well 'set' the hen woodcock, who carries out all the incubation duties, is very loath to leave the nest and sits very "tight". With the aid of a moderate telephoto lens and by inching slowly towards the sitting bird I was able to take a series of photographs starting at twenty feet away and finishing only six feet from the nest. The only reaction this produced from the woodcock was to make it crouch lower in the nest as I approached.

I returned to the forest the following day, which was a Bank Holiday. I arrived during a period of torrential rain, which lasted just over an hour, and ceased as suddenly as it had started. When I reached the nest I found the bird absent but the four eggs and the nest were dry. This provided an ideal opportunity to photograph the eggs. The woodcock had sat out the torrential rain and must have left the nest to dry herself. I left the site for an hour and then returned to find the woodcock once more back on the nest. As the light was now better than it had been on the previous day, I took a second series of photographs using a similar technique to that already described. Close to the woodcock is a beautiful study in warm brown autumnal tints being mottled and barred with cream so that its outline is quite indistinct when seen against the background of leaves and plants. Only the eye, set high up on the head, gives away the camouflage.

By 3 June, when I was next able to visit the nest, the young had successfully hatched and had left the nest.

I am very grateful to Julie Horton and her father for the care they took in preserving the nest, thus affording me a long-sought opportunity to study the woodcock at close quarters.

Editor's note - (also see editorial)

This article originally appeared in the South Staffordshire Naturalists' Journal in 1973. It is reproduced here as a tribute to Neville Wilde who was a regular and popular contributor to the Wyre Forest Study Group's Review since its inception. I wish to thank the members of S. Staffs. Group for allowing this article to be reprinted.