Spotted Timberdoodles: Predicting where American woodcocks near Middlebury, VT perform courtship displays

What are Timberdoodles?

Timberdoodle is another name for the American woodcock, a pigeon-sized bird that migrates to Vermont in early spring.

To thrive, woodcocks need a mosaic of habitats. Young forests or shrubby areas near wetlands support feeding and nesting. Probe for earthworms in the moist soil. Woodcocks spend days under brushy cover, where their mottled plumage and 360-degree vision field help them avoid predators.

Timberdoodles need clearings as well as cover. At night they roost on the ground in open areas, where they can easily take flight if disturbed by prowling predators. Males arrive before females and seek clearings in which to perform their courtship rituals, which take place in Vermont as early as March.

What are their courtship displays?

On spring evenings from March to April, the male timberdoodle seeks out singing grounds: forest clearings, hayfields, and other open areas.

At dusk it begins to sing an intermittent, nasal "peent." After about a dozen calls it audibly begins to sing, the sound rising from the ground. At 300 feet, the sound of the notes and then tumbles upward, still singing, before pulling out of the dives to glide quietly to the ground and repeat the process.

Where might one observe this spectacle?

One way to confirm my predictions is to visit the locations on the map above.

When: late March - April

How to plan to arrive: by sunset, wearing warm clothing and with ears tuned for a peent call or twit-twiing wingbeats and eyes peeled for a dark silhouette.

And relay sightings to marcella.houghton@gmail.com!

How did I make my prediction?

Since woodcocks need a variety of habitats, I predicted that potential singing grounds would more likely attract woodcocks with increasing proximity to key habitat features.

Woodcocks prefer singing grounds close to slow-flowing streams and wetlands, and close to young deciduous forest cover.

Water Features
Wetlands, Ponds, and Slow-moving streams (more than 5 tributaries)

Young Forests
New growth of forested wetlands and some deciduous forest between 1992 and 2006

Timberdoodles rely on four habitats:

- Singing
  - Developed open space, Crops, Grass, Hay
  - At least 1 acre
  - Adjacent to water features

- Roosting
  - Grass, Hay
  - At least 5 acres
  - Adjacent to water features

- Feeding
  - Young forests, Shrubs, Forested wetlands
  - Top 5 acres
  - Adjacent to water features

- Nesting
  - Young forests, Shrubs, Forested wetlands
  - At least 5 acres
  - Within 1/2 mile of water features

Best Singing Grounds
(1) are adjacent to (2) Roosting
(3) Feeding (4) Nesting

by Marcella Houghton