

Rites of a Woodcock Spring

Evolution is a process, not a prankster with a droll sense of humor. But one of its inventions—the American woodcock—is arguably the most comical-looking bird in North America. This plump inland shorebird of forest and farmland resembles, at seven ounces in weight, a giant dumpling attached to a set of flexible extra-long tweezers for a bill that seems too long for its roly-poly body. The strange appearance is matched by the common names applied to the woodcock: timberdoodle, bogsucker, night partridge, mudsnipe, brush snipe, hokumpoke, becasse, and Labrador twister.



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American Woodcock

If you put aside our human sense of aesthetics, though, this orb with feathers begins to seem more like a marvel of evolution by natural selection than a design in need of a recall. Take for example its camouflaged plumage. Even day-old chicks blend into the leaf-strewn forest floor and know to “freeze” if frightened or alerted by the hen’s alarm call. Woodcock chicks are termed *precocial*, scientific parlance for ready to walk and feed after hatching.

Then there are the unusual eyes, located high and to the back of the head, making the American woodcock the only avian species in nature’s showroom that sports 360° vision. This positioning allows a woodcock, head down in the soil while hunting worms, to detect a stealthy snake or skunk attempting to grab it from behind. Earthworms are two-thirds of the diet of an adult woodcock; the bird plucks this fat and protein-rich meal from the upper soil layer using its sensitive prehensile bill tip that can detect the vibrations and movement of its squirmy target. Even its nostrils are

pitched far forward, which assists the long bill in detecting night crawlers. But the oddest woodcock characteristic is that, compared to every other species of bird, their brains are built upside down. This is likely the result of the nostrils shifting across evolutionary time to the front and the eyes moving to the top and back in the skull rather than toward the front of the skull as in other birds.

Most endearing of all the woodcock’s qualities, though, are its unusual vocalizations and mating behavior. Males utter a loud and penetrating *peent* on the mating grounds and make kissing sounds as they enter their nuptial flights.

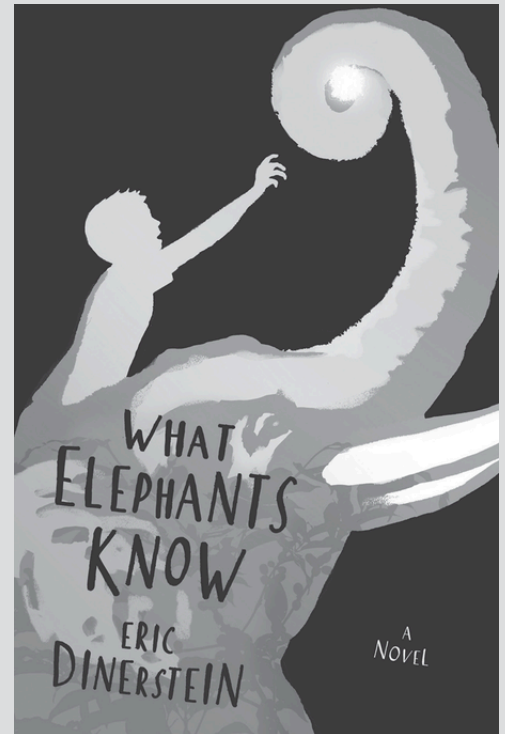
One evening at dusk last month I was with friends at Little Bennett Park watching male woodcocks displaying to their gathered females. Little Bennett is the largest park in our region—Montgomery County’s Serengeti—and a great place to gain an unobstructed view of woodcock males displaying in a specific locale that lazy birders like me love: the main parking lot. A bit of clearing is all male woodcocks need to start their peenting, kissing sounds, all followed by lift off, a sharp gain in altitude and then a dramatic descent accompanied by a distinct whistling sound made as the wind rushes through their wings. One of my companions, Carole Bergmann, Forest Ecologist/Field Botanist of Montgomery County Parks, has been visiting Little Bennett for decades and watching these birds. The ones we saw that night could well have been the tenth-generation descendants of the birds she first saw years ago. Woodcock typically live a few years but some birds have survived until the age of seven.

A few days later, we witnessed a similar display featuring more males at Huntley Meadows State Park in Virginia, a mecca for birders. It would be generous of woodcock to begin their courtship flights at dusk, as they are said to do in some field guides, but around here, the action really picks up later, as darkness rapidly approaches. Thankfully, on the night at Huntley, a waxing moon allowed us to see the woodcock mating flight in good light.

Traveling far to see your “quest bird” and then finding it right in the parking lot is one exemplary form of birding karma. I experienced this phenomenon to an extreme when on an April

afternoon about six years ago I heard a *peent* coming from my backyard garden. I knew it was too early for the other migrant, the Common nighthawk, that also utters a *peent*-like call, to make its way back from South America. We usually see them flying high above Cabin John around May 5th. So I went out to investigate and to my great shock found a pair of woodcock hanging out under spicebush. I have not seen American woodcock since on my property, but they are the most revered visitors we have ever entertained. Timberdoodle, bogsucker, night partridge, mudsnipe, brush snipe, hokumpoke, because, and Labrador twister—feel free to drop in anytime. I will be waiting. —🐸

Book Reading Invitation



Cabin John residents are invited to a book reading by Eric Dinerstein, author of the Local Nature column, on Tuesday, May 17 at 7 pm at Politics and Prose, 5015 Connecticut Avenue, Washington, D.C.

The novel, *What Elephants Know* (Disney Hyperion), is available May 17th or can be pre-order now.

About the book: Abandoned in the jungle of the Nepalese Borderlands, two-year-old Nandu is found living under the protective watch of a pack of wild dogs. From his mysterious beginnings, fate delivers him to the king's elephant stable, where he is raised by unlikely parents—the wise head of the stable, Subbasahib, and Devi Kali, a fierce and affectionate female elephant. When the king's government threatens to close the stable, Nandu, now twelve, searches for a way to save his family and community. A risky plan could be the answer. But to succeed, they'll need a great tusker. The future is in Nandu's hands as he sets out to find a bull elephant and bring him back to the Borderlands. Author Eric Dinerstein brings to life Nepal's breathtaking jungle wildlife and rural culture, as seen through the eyes of a young outcast, struggling to find his place in the world.

