

HIGH ALTITUDE RECORDS OF THE AMERICAN WOODCOCK IN THE GREAT BALSAM MOUNTAINS AND PISGAH RIDGE OF NORTH CAROLINA

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In a previous paper (Simpson, 1968) I summarized evidence that the American Woodcock (*Philohela minor*) occurs in high altitude regions of six major mountain ranges of North Carolina. Since that time a large number of sightings in the region of the Blue Ridge Parkway between Mt. Pisgah and Richland Balsam suggests that the bird is much more common at high elevations than is generally indicated in the literature. These records are from a 23-mile section of the Parkway through Pisgah Ridge and the Great Balsam Mountains, and the observations are based primarily on the call notes and courtship flight song as described in detail by Wade (1957) and Simpson (1968). The precise locale of each record is indicated by the milepost system utilized by the Parkway.

PISGAH RIDGE

Observations from this range lie along the crest of the ridge from Flat Laurel Gap (35° 24' N, 82° 45' W) to Tanasee Bald (35° 17' N, 82° 55' W).

1. PISGAH INN, FLAT LAUREL GAP - Haywood County - 4,900 feet - milepost 408.6.
11 May 1968 - 11 PM - 2 birds - "peent" notes and flight song (Simpson, 1968)
21 February 1970 - 9 PM - 1 bird seen - James Walters (pers. com.)
20 March 1970 - 9 PM - 1 bird seen - James Walters (pers. com.)
6 June 1970 - 7 AM - 2 birds seen - MBSJr.
8 June 1970 - 6 AM - 1 bird seen - MBSJr.
2. FRYINGPAN GAP - Transylvania County - 4,930 feet - milepost 409.6
14 May 1970 - 9:55 PM - 1 bird - "peent" notes and flight song - MBSJr.
3. GRAVEYARD FIELDS - Haywood County - 4,955 feet - milepost 418.8
5 June 1970 - 8:30 PM - 1 bird - "peent" notes - MBSJr.
4. BLACK BALSAM KNOB - Haywood County - 5,880 feet - 1.8 mi. NW of Graveyard Fields
24 July 1968 - 11 AM - 1 bird seen - MBSJr.
5. DEVIL'S COURTHOUSE - Haywood County - 5,460 feet - milepost 422.4
14 May 1970 - 12 midnight - 1 bird - flight song - MBSJr.
6. BEECH GAP - Transylvania County - 5,340 feet - milepost 423.2
15 July 1968 - 6 AM - 1 bird seen - MBSJr.

GREAT BALSAM MOUNTAINS

1. TANASEE BALD - Haywood County - 5,300 feet - milepost 423.7
11 April 1968 - 9:15 PM - 2 birds - "peent" notes and flight song - (Simpson, 1968)
12 April 1968 - 7:30 PM - 1 bird - "peent" notes and flight song - (Simpson, 1968)
10 May 1968 - 11 PM - 2 birds - "peent" notes and flight song - (Simpson, 1968)

- 15 July 1968 - 6:15 PM - 1 bird - "peent" notes and flight song - MBSJr.
 31 May 1969 - 9:45 PM - 1 bird - "peent" notes and flight song - MBSJr.
 13 June 1969 - 9:30 PM - 1 bird - "peent" notes and flight song - MBSJr.
2. HERRIN KNOB - Haywood County - 5,400 feet - milepost 424
 11 April 1968 - 9:45 PM - 2 birds - "peent" notes and flight song - MBSJr.
 13 June 1969 - 9:30 PM - 2 birds - "peent" notes and flight song - MBSJr.
3. BEARTRAIL RIDGE - Haywood County - 5,865 feet - milepost 430.4
 11 April 1968 - 11 PM - 2 birds - "peent" notes and flight song - (Simpson, 1968)
 10 May 1968 - 10 PM - 2 birds - "peent" notes and flight song - (Simpson, 1968)
 31 May 1969 - 10:10 PM - 2 birds - "peent" notes - MBSJr.
 14 May 1970 - 10:50 PM - 1 bird - "peent" notes - MBSJr.
4. COWEE MOUNTAINS OVERLOOK - Jackson County - 5,950 feet - milepost 430.7
 14 May 1970 - 11:10 PM - 1 bird - "peent" notes - MBSJr.
5. HAYWOOD-JACKSON OVERLOOK - Haywood and Jackson Counties - 6,020 feet - milepost 431
 31 May 1969 - 11 PM - 1 bird - "peent" notes and flight song - MBSJr.
6. RICHLAND BALSAM OVERLOOK - Jackson County - 6,040 feet - milepost 431.4
 10 May 1968 - 10:15 PM - 2 birds - "peent" notes and flight song - (Simpson, 1968)
 31 May 1969 - 12:30 AM - 1 bird - "peent" notes - MBSJr.
 23 May 1970 - 9 PM - 1 bird - "peent" notes and flight song - MBSJr.

DISCUSSION

A total of 41 observations of the American Woodcock are documented from the Blue Ridge Parkway in the region between mileposts 408.6 and 431.4. The mean elevation for these sightings is 5,709 feet, with a range of 4,900 to 6,040 feet. The records span the period from 21 February (1970) to 24 July (1968), with 1 from February (2.5%), 1 from March (2.5%), 7 from April (17%), 21 from May (51%), 7 from June (17%), and 4 from July (10%).

As discussed in detail in my previous paper (Simpson, 1968), this population influx probably represents a response to alterations in the vegetation pattern of the region. Sheldon (1967) states that the single critical factor in woodcock survival is competition for breeding and courtship sites. The woodcock requires display sites in an early stage of plant succession, with open areas of low, woody plants at a height of 1 to 5 feet, with adjacent regions of low herbaceous species. Furthermore, the height and proximity of surrounding trees must not impede the take-off flight of the displaying males. Marshall (1958) noted that woodcock will abandon a display territory when 60% of the vegetation reaches a height of 6 to 10 feet, while Sheldon (1967) indicated that almost all courtship sites presently utilized by the bird were created either directly or indirectly by man.

In the Pisgah Ridge and Great Balsam Mountain area, two factors, both due to man, may account for the creation and perpetuation of suitable display territories. As mentioned previously (Simpson, 1968), the creation of the Blue Ridge Parkway opened up sizable areas in the forest cover, while the policy of frequent mowing of shoulder vegetation creates a disclimax situation in which ideal courtship sites are maintained in a relatively static successional state. However, the records from Graveyard Fields and Black Balsam Knob indicate a second factor of importance, namely fire. On Thanksgiving Day 1925, a forest fire, probably ignited by a logging train, destroyed over

25,000 acres of Canadian zone forest in this region; and according to Lord (1963) the soil continued burning for over two weeks, thereby severely damaging the recovery potential of the vegetation. Consequently, much of this area has developed into grass balds or open, grassy areas with scattered, low shrubs; Catawba rhododendron (*Rhododendron catawbiense*), serviceberry (*Amelanchier laevis*), mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*), blueberry (*Vaccinium* sp.), and mountain winterberry (*Ilex montana*). The severe soil damage has thus created an ecological situation favorable to the behavior requirements of the woodcock and allowed its perpetuation in these high elevations.

In my earlier paper (Simpson, 1968), I noted that many of the records were adjacent to regions of Fraser fir (*Abies fraseri*) and red spruce (*Picea rubens*), but I pointed out that this association might be coincidental. The present data indicate that such is the case. The numerous records from Pisgah Inn, Fryingpan Gap, Graveyard Fields, and Black Balsam Knob are far removed from these forests; and the sightings from areas adjacent to the Canadian zone woodlands are therefore probably due to the local impact of the Parkway on the ecology of the region.

To date, there are no records of nests or young birds from this area, so the possibility of a breeding population remains unsubstantiated. Critcher and Quay (1953) have pointed out that the presence of displaying males is no guarantee of female presence or nesting. However, on 24 May 1942, Tanner (1942) discovered a nest containing 4 eggs at 6,000 feet on Roan Mountain, Mitchell County, N.C. This nest, located on an open grassy rhododendron bald, remains the only evidence that the species nests at such elevations.

SUMMARY

A total of 41 records of the American Woodcock from elevations of 4,900 to 6,040 feet in the Great Balsam Mountains and Pisgah Ridge indicate a sizable high altitude population, although no evidence of breeding in these ranges has been found. The creation of static display territories by the Blue Ridge Parkway and forest fires probably account for the extent of the population in the region.

LITERATURE CITED

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Heintooga Ridge Road & Balsam Mountain on Blue Ridge Parkway, North Carolina, scenic drive in the Great Smoky Mountains.Â Heintooga Ridge and Balsam Mountain Roads are usually open from late May through October. At Black Camp Gap at the entrance to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, thereâ€™s an interesting memorial erected by Masonic orders from around the country. This stone monument was built when the park was created and contains examples of rock types from most states and many places throughout the world.Â Balsam Mountain offers the highest tent camping within the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. When the campground was set up in the 1930s, builders had tent campers in mind. The mountains of North Carolina offer some unexpected treats for skiers and boarders. Far enough south to dodge the extreme cold temperatures that often accompany the ski resorts in the northern states, and high enough to deliver some serious vertical, the ski resorts in North Carolina are a tempting destination.Â Quaint mountain towns set in the scenic Blue Ridge Mountains add to the experience and come with ample aprÃ’s ski opportunities and a full range of lodging options.Â With a peak elevation of 5,506 feet, Beech is known for being the highest ski area in the eastern USA, but it also has its own unique and fun vibe, which sets it apart. Eight lifts service the mountain's 17 runs, spread across 95 skiable acres. Total vertical drop is 830 feet.