

Woodcock

Sitting in the conservatory one evening a few days ago we noticed a bird fly rapidly through the garden from the trees behind us and dive down into the field at the foot of the garden. It was almost dark but we were both sure that it was a Woodcock. Once you are familiar with them they are a very distinctive shape.



We had never seen a Woodcock at Orlandon Kilns before but it is likely that they are all around us in the winter. They come to Britain in huge numbers to spend the winter with us – by day in damp woodlands and by night feeding and roosting out on grassy fields. They are common but rarely seen – apart from anything else they are very cryptically coloured and when crouched on a woodland floor amongst dead leaves they are almost impossible to see. The only people who see them regularly are those hardy souls who search for them in the fields in winter at night with a spotlight in order to ring them. Apparently there can sometimes be up to 10 Woodcock in one field. From these ringed birds we know that our winter Woodcock go back to Eastern Europe, and particularly Russia, to breed – most of the ringing recoveries are from birds shot there in the following autumn.

Woodcock do not breed in Pembrokeshire, and only breed sparsely in Wales, despite there being plenty of their favoured wet woodland. It seems that we are on the edge of their natural range – they are really a bird of the continental taiga. However, they do breed in suitable spots in northern England and Scotland, and also in the New Forest and surrounding areas. When we lived in West Berkshire we took part in a Woodcock survey. This involved standing, at dusk, in a suitable glade or crossing of rides, in the middle of a wood and counting the “roding” Woodcock. “Roding” is the unique display of male Woodcock – they fly with stiff wings along rides and over open areas and make the strangest of calls – a couple of very low frog-like grunts followed by a very high-pitched squeak. We managed to find a few Woodcock at each site which was most gratifying.



So how do you see a Woodcock? Not easily. Although they are technically a wader there is no point looking for them on mudflats – these large, squat, somewhat ungainly birds are strictly land-based and very secretive. (They should not be confused with Snipe, their close relatives, which are smaller, often lurk at the edges of water and occasionally allow themselves to be seen!) The best chance is to find a

roding bird in May in the New Forest, or perhaps go out walking across the fields on a dark winter's night with a spotlight! Or you could get your gun out and go on a Woodcock shoot - according to Google there is at least one location in Pembrokeshire where you can do this.

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