

BY KATHERINE HAUSWIRTH

Early one spring, so early we still needed to zip our winter coats to our chins, I took my 12-year-old-son Gavin and his friends to a talk and walk in Westbrook. We were at the Stewart B. McKinney National Wildlife Refuge's Salt Marsh Unit, and it was time for the annual presentation on the American woodcock. A small troop of interested souls gathered in the refuge's stone headquarters as dusk started to encroach.

American woodcocks are listed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources as a species of "least concern," owing chiefly to their extensive native range, which includes the United States, Canada, Mexico, Saint Pierre, and Miquelon. After a winter in warmer climes, these birds start northward migration early in the new year, arriving in the Northeast from mid-March to early April, when courting and breeding begin.

I felt jumpy inside. Before seeing the birds, there was a slideshow to view, and I knew that missing dusk would mean missing the magic of these birds' springtime courtship ritual. But after a while, I relaxed into it. I knew that the presenter, Patti Laudano, has been giving these talks for more than 10 years and has her timing down to a science. Ms. Laudano, president of the Potapaug Audubon Society based in Essex, helps monitor the local population of this particular species to inform Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection data.

I wasn't the only one who was jumpy. My gaggle of boys squirmed, and this was no reflection on the presentation. They were just being their age, overflowing with boundless energy. And they wanted to meet these birds, live and in person! But we became more attentive when the audience was asked to play a visual game with the projected photographs: find the American woodcock! Both sexes of the bird are virtually indistinguishable from the leaf litter. They sport a mottled brown camouflage, which comes in especially



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*Woodcocks arrive in New England in early spring and then begin their fascinating rituals.*

## SPRING AT THE SINGING GROUND: THE AMERICAN WOODCOCK

handy when the females make their shallow nests on the ground. Even when a camera lens captures them front and center, we can only detect them with a great show of peering and squinting at what appears to be a nondescript pile of leaves.

Woodcocks may blend in, in terms of color, but they break the typical bird mold in other ways. They have short legs and an overall chubby look, and their exceptionally long, thin beaks—designed for digging up earthworms—help even amateur birders identify them. It's not only looks that make them stand out from the avian crowd. The males are rock stars, in terms of their courtship performance. In fact, the birds require an open tract of "singing ground" to make it all happen.

Our group stepped out into the chilly air and our footsteps crunched toward a flat, grassy section adjacent to the forest. My eyes

adjusted to the grainy gray of the evening, and I watched the shapes of the boys doing their adolescent thing—making little jokes, bumping into each other, checking their phones. I worried about whether they'd be able to hold still long enough to fully take in the moment (and not disturb the older members of the crowd). Soon, though, we all fell silent. With a

bit of direction from Ms. Laudano and other folks in the know, we strained to hear the first clue that a male was nearby and ready for love: "*PEENT! . . . PEENT! . . . PEENT! . . . PEENT!*"

This male woodcock, who remained hidden from view, was projecting his somewhat nasal voice in all directions, calling while slowly turning in a circle on the ground. And then he shot up into the sky. We craned our necks and swiveled our heads. Fingers pointed and hushed voices gave a play-by-play—"there he is!"—"no, *there!*"—"he's over there now!!"

His flight had an erratic pattern, and the surprising whistling sound made by his feathers in flight helped us locate him. As he descended, he emitted another noise, which some describe as "whimpering chirps." Then he landed about where he started, repeating the ritual in the hopes that a female might respond. Eventually his performance stopped, so I hope he had some luck, although it would be hard to tell in the dark what exactly happened. His success would have meant that the pair mated—and let's leave this part of the story discreet.

The brown, pink, and gray mottled eggs that result from woodcock pairings hatch within about 20 days, and the small families on the forest floor (which lack the regular presence of a father) stay in the nesting area until it's time to fly south again, in October.

The mothers are quite protective over their nests. Ms. Laudano remembers her first encounter with a woodcock—a mother bird who must have stayed with the nest until Ms. Laudano practically stomped on

*continued on page 25*

bluefish, swordfish, halibut, and seal. During winter, they would engage in ice fishing on frozen streams and rivers.

Game was also important and well liked. Their woodlands were regularly burned once or twice a year and appeared open and park-like. A primary purpose of the regular ground fires was to drive game for hunting (though there were many other ecological benefits). Venison meat was one of their staples, and they hunted for a supply each fall. Bear furnished juicy steaks as well as a delicious fat to use for cooking. Raccoon, beaver, otter, skunk, rabbit, woodchuck, squirrel, rattlesnake, frog, whale (if washed ashore)—they ate meat of many animals and wasted no part of the animal. Native Americans did not eat carnivorous animals, such as wolves. Also enjoyed by the natives were the multitude of wild birds that lived in the marshes or woods—ducks, geese, partridge, woodcock, quail, pigeons, and turkey.

### Daily Grinding of Maize

In southern New England, the staff of life was maize, and there were innumerable ways of preparing it. Maize could be cooked by itself or in a variety of combinations with fruits, vegetables, nuts, flesh, and fish. For many dishes, the kernels had to be ground into meal or flour, so grinding was a daily activity. As valuable as maize was for natives' diet, beans were just as important. Most often, beans and corn were cooked together—"sutsguttahash." Today's dietitians refer to combining corn and beans together as complimentary proteins, because each plant furnishes a missing amino acid for the other, so together the mixture is as nutritious as an animal protein serving. Succotash was the central

feature of Quinnehtukqut cookery and the most common meal. Also produced in the garden were squash and pumpkins. They had an important place in the diet and were used—young or mature, fresh or dried—as a main dish or mixed into bread or porridge. Squash and pumpkin seeds were a delicacy and were either roasted or dried for multiple cooking or medicinal uses.

The native peoples accumulated an extensive knowledge of wild plant usage through thousands of years of observation and experimentation. Some "wild" vegetables they used in their cooking included Jerusalem artichoke, fiddlehead ferns, lambsquarters, chickweed, purslane, milkweed, cattails, wild leeks, groundnuts, arrowhead plant, and yellow pond lilies.

Children were enlisted to harvest the wild berries of the meadows and open woods. They gathered strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, blueberries, huckleberries, gooseberries, and elderberries. Berries were eaten fresh, added to breads, or dried for winter use.

Another very important source of food for the native peoples were food nuts. They conserved acorns, beechnuts, black walnuts, butternuts, chestnuts, hazelnuts, and hickory nuts. These were enjoyed raw or roasted, and if ground, they could be mixed with water to create a beverage or they could be used as a seasoning in cooking. Sugar and salt were not available so were not used in native cooking. (Northern New England tribes tapped maple trees for syrup.) The hickory tree was especially prized for its sweet-tasting nuts. The starchy and protein-rich American chestnut was easily harvested, and these nuts were enjoyed for their sweet taste. Chestnut meal was commonly used in making breads and puddings.

for these birds are needed for courtship, and they are also favored for nighttime roosting in the summer and early autumn. Young, open hardwood stands that primarily contain seedlings and saplings serve as nesting and brood-rearing areas. Similar stands with a dense overstory are used by the whole age gamut for daytime feeding and resting, and fertile, moist areas hosting alders and second-growth hardwoods can supply the many earthworms needed for nutrition.

When spring arrives, bringing the American robin, tree buds, and fresh trickles of water, the very particular needs of the American

## TASTING NATIVE CONNECTICUT FOOD

It seems that Native American cooking has the makings of a culinary trend, but relatively few restaurants in this country focus on American Indian dishes. When the federal government forced tribes to move to new areas, this upended the tribes' foodways. There are almost as many cuisines as tribes, and Native Americans have preserved their way of cooking mostly through oral tradition and within families.

A highly regarded café, Mitsitam, operates at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. The food is set up in a series of stations, each dedicated to a different region of the country. Here in Connecticut, the Mashantucket Pequot Museum runs a café that serves some authentic food dishes of the Eastern Woodlands Indians. Chef Sherry Pocknett, a member of the Mashpee Wampanoag tribe of Cape Cod, is the food manager. She also teaches indigenous Connecticut cooking classes in the winter.

From the woods, meadows, waters, and cultivated fields, the native Connecticut tribes enjoyed a wonderful diversity of foods from this fruitful land and lived well. Catastrophically, their way of life disappeared. Their place names for our rivers and hills remain and remind us of them. Their invisible presence is challenging us today to love our earth and to remember their heritage. A hike along one of their ancient trails restores our senses and our souls. We remember the sacredness of honoring the land that feeds and belongs to us all.

*Jean Crum Jones lives with her farming family in Shelton.*

### WOODCOCKS *continued from page 23*

her—suddenly flew up into her face. I hope for such an exciting moment one day, willing to risk the palpitations it may invoke.

Although this species is of "least concern," it's worth noting that the American woodcock population is decreasing overall in its usual areas of occupancy. Fewer and fewer old farms are reverting to forests, and these have been the best locales for providing the multiple habitats that the bird needs. According to the Connecticut DEEP, no less than four habitats are needed to support the woodcock. The open areas that are singing grounds

woodcock require us to do more than simply look out our windows to see if these awkward and endearing creatures have appeared yet. But the pilgrimage to their territory has, for me, become a much-beloved milestone that marks how I welcome spring. I hope I'll see you at the singing ground, or trodding the leaf litter extra carefully, as the pace of our Connecticut spring begins to quicken.

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