

The News Journal

Depart from the usual game – try hunting woodcocks instead

For Delaware hunters interested in table fare other than venison steaks, Nov. 24 marked the opening of several waterfowl and small game hunting seasons.

With the majority of Delaware waterfowl and small game hunters opting to pursue ducks, geese, or rabbits during these seasons, I focus my hunting efforts on a lesser-known, frequently overlooked species of gamebird – the woodcock.



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The American woodcock, or timberdoodle, is about the size of a quail and is perfectly camouflaged to blend in with the forest floor. The birds are mostly shades of brown and gray with tan, rust, and black accents, and their eyes are relatively big and high on their heads so they can see their surroundings while they probe for food using their long, flexible bills.

Hunting the superbly camouflaged woodcock is no easy task. The birds are content to sit tight when approached by potential predators, so many hunters simply walk by them while rabbit, squirrel, or deer hunting. In fact, I would discourage any hunter from pursuing woodcock unless he or she has a good bird dog that will find and point the live birds and then find and retrieve any downed birds.

Because the woodcock's diet consists mainly of worms, they migrate south during the fall and winter months to find food in unfrozen ground. The Atlantic seaboard is a major migratory flyway of woodcock. Directly in the flyway is the Delaware Bay, which presents



Courtesy of Steven Kendus

A good bird dog, like Steven Kendus' trusty sidekick, Gus, is imperative for hunting well-camouflaged woodcocks. The dog will help find and point at live birds, while retrieving the downed ones.

Hunting calendar

• **Delaware woodcock season**
through Dec. 13, Dec. 23-Jan. 1

• **Delaware duck season**
Oct. 24-Nov. 11, Nov. 24-Dec. 6,
Dec. 19-Jan. 24

• **Delaware migratory
Canada Goose season**
Nov. 24-Dec. 6, Dec. 19-Jan. 26

the birds with a challenge due to the long, nonstop flights needed to cross from New Jersey to Delaware. Because the woodcock need to rest and feed before flying across the Bay, they frequently assemble in large groups in Cape May, N.J. Likewise, the woodcock need to rest and feed after they cross the bay, so Delaware is a prime location for hunting them.

With relatively few hunters pursuing woodcock, it is no problem finding public hunting spots. Since woodcock look for worm-rich, unfrozen

ground to feed on, focus your hunts on boggy areas, stream and river edges, flooded fields with some dry areas, and spots of thawed ground caused by underground pipes or springs. Woodcock can also be found in high concentrations in areas of new forest growth, where young trees are densely grouped and are no more than 10-15 feet high.

My bird dog, Gus, and I have harvested woodcock on both sides of the Delaware River and Bay. For New Jersey hunters, try Salem River Wildlife Management Area. For Delaware hunters, try Augustine Wildlife Area and Chesapeake and Delaware Canal Wildlife Areas in New Castle County and Blackiston Wildlife Area in Kent County.

Steven Kendus' *Hunter's Journal* appears monthly in *The News Journal*. Kendus is the author of "Hunting The First State: A Guide to Delaware Hunting." Follow his blog at www.eastcoasthunting.blogspot.com. Contact him at skendus@HuntingTheFirstState.com.