

FIRST RECORD OF THE AMERICAN WOODCOCK FOR CALIFORNIA, WITH A SUMMARY OF ITS STATUS IN WESTERN NORTH AMERICA

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On 3 November 1998, Patten, McCaskie, and Daniel S. Cooper discovered an American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) at Iron Mountain Pumping Plant in southeastern San Bernardino County, California. Patten first noted the bird at about 0715 PST as it stood in a yard beneath a large planted elm. We subsequently studied it through binoculars for 15 minutes at close range (5–10 m) as it waddled around on a lawn and hid in an adjacent flowerbed; it also flew on two occasions. Viewing conditions were excellent (it was clear and 55°–60° F, with a stiff Beaufort 3–4 northerly wind).

This woodcock could not be located on 4 November (Walter Wehtje pers. comm.) or 5 November (*vide* Chet McGaugh). Patten rediscovered it at 0830 PST on 7 November. Morlan, Robbie Fischer, and Karen Gilbert observed it later that day (1530–1700 PST). It could not be located on 8 November (Mike San Miguel pers. comm.) but was observed and photographed (Figures 1–3) by Don Roberson during the morning (0630–0730 PST) of 9 November. It was not seen thereafter (*vide* Larry Sansone et al., pers. comm.).

This bird represents the first record for California of an apparently wild American Woodcock. Furthermore, it appears to represent the first photographically documented record of the species west of the continental divide.

DESCRIPTION

The following description is from notes by Patten and Morlan, with supplementary information from notes by McCaskie, Fischer, and Gilbert and photographs and notes supplied by Roberson:

Behavior and Vocalizations. The woodcock wobbled about when it walked. Much of this movement was a combined dipping and side-to-side wiggle of its body, with little head movement. It walked and stood with its bill pointed downward at about a 45° angle and slightly cocked its stubby tail. It roosted like most birds, with its bill tucked deeply into its back feathers. It roosted on the ground in a shady spot beneath low shrubs. It tended to keep its eyes at least partly open even when roosting.

This bird never vocalized, although it did produce a distinctive sound: the wings emitted a strangely musical whistling when it flew, a sound reminiscent of the wing whistle of a Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*), but distinctly more trilled and squeaky.

General Appearance, Bare Parts, and Structure. The bird resembled a snipe in its plump build, short legs, short tail, and extremely long bill. It was larger and stockier than a Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) in overall

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Figure 1. American Woodcock at Iron Mountain Pumping Plant, San Bernardino County, California, 9 November 1998. The black barring on the rear crown is diagnostic of *Scolopax*.

Photograph by Don Roberson



Figure 2. American Woodcock at Iron Mountain Pumping Plant, San Bernardino County, California, 9 November 1998. Note the unbarred cinnamon underparts.

Photograph by Don Roberson



Figure 3. American Woodcock at Iron Mountain Pumping Plant, San Bernardino County, California, 9 November 1998. Note the bold gray "V" on the mantle and the gray stripes through the scapulars.

Photograph by Don Roberson

girth and mass. Furthermore, it was stockier than a snipe and had a large head with prominent large black eyes situated closer to the crown than on any bird we have seen.

Its bill was twice as long as the head, quite deep at its base, and dull pinkish on the basal one-third and gray-brown distally. We did not note differences in color between the maxilla and mandible. The short, sturdy legs were dull grayish pink. It looked nearly tailless. On short, rounded wings, it flew as it stood, with its bill pointing downward at a 45° angle.

Plumage Pattern and Coloration. The bird had the typical woodcock plumage pattern (shared by all six species of *Scolopax*): wide black bars on the crown and nape, intricately patterned upperparts, and simply patterned underparts.

The head was mostly unmarked rich buff (approaching pumpkin orange), emphasizing the huge black eyes. The eyes were encircled by a nearly complete eye ring that was buff above and white with a bluish cast below. Thin rusty-buff bars narrowly separated three wide squared-off black bars on the nape and hindcrown; the top of the crown had a fourth black bar much narrower than the other three. A jagged black line through the eye was thicker and darker in the lores. Another duller black stripe was on the lower rear edge of the auriculars. The crown was gray, contrasting with the buff forehead, black nape bars, and buff auriculars.

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The back feathers were grayish with fine buff vermiculation on both webs. Each back feather was narrowly fringed with rich buff. The mantle was framed by a broad pale gray stripe on either side (formed by the lower scapulars); these stripes formed a prominent pale "V" on the upperparts that was readily visible even when the bird roosted. The upper scapulars had black lobate centers with pointed tips and notched edges. The wing coverts were largely rusty, frosted with gray. The coverts had a complex internal pattern of black marks and lines.

The underparts were uniform unmarked rich buff from the chin to the undertail coverts, save for a warm ruddy wash on the sides of the breast that softly contrasted with the remainder of the underparts. We did not note the pattern on the undertail coverts or the rectrices. The long uppertail coverts mostly hid the tail, although black tips to the rectrices were barely visible. The uppertail coverts were buff with coarse blackish transverse vermiculations.

IDENTIFICATION SUMMARY

Distinguishing the American Woodcock from the five other woodcock species is not difficult (Hayman et al. 1986). Three others, the Eurasian (*S. rusticola*), the Amami (*S. mira*) of the Ryukyu Islands, and the Dusky Woodcock (*S. saturata*) of Indonesia, have extensively barred underparts. The other two, the Celebes Woodcock (*S. celebensis*) of Sulawesi and the possibly extinct Obi Woodcock (*S. rochussenii*) of the Moluccas, lack the bold gray "V" on the mantle, are larger, and have a different body color and feather patterning.

Ageing and sexing of the American Woodcock are probably impossible in the field because the sexes are basically identical (except for females being over 10% larger, with longer bills) and juveniles look virtually the same as adults (Martin 1964, Prater et al. 1977, Hayman et al. 1986:347). There may be some tendency for juveniles to have a slightly grayer chin, throat, and auriculars (Paulson 1993, Keppie and Whiting 1994). See the key in Martin (1964) or Sheldon (1967:203) for detailed information about ageing this species in hand by the pattern on the inner secondaries.

DISTRIBUTIONAL SUMMARY

The American Woodcock occurs in North America east of the Great Plains. It breeds from southeastern Manitoba east through the Maritime Provinces of Canada and south nearly to the Gulf of Mexico (Nero 1977, 1986, Keppie and Whiting 1994, A.O.U. 1998). In recent decades the western edge of its breeding range has expanded slightly into eastern North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas (Smith and Barclay 1978). It winters in the southern third of its breeding range, south to the Gulf Coast and through central Texas sparingly to the lower Rio Grande valley (Keppie and Whiting 1994).

The American Woodcock has been recorded west of its normal range on over 30 occasions (Appendix), mainly east of the continental divide (Figure 4). There are records for Saskatchewan, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado,

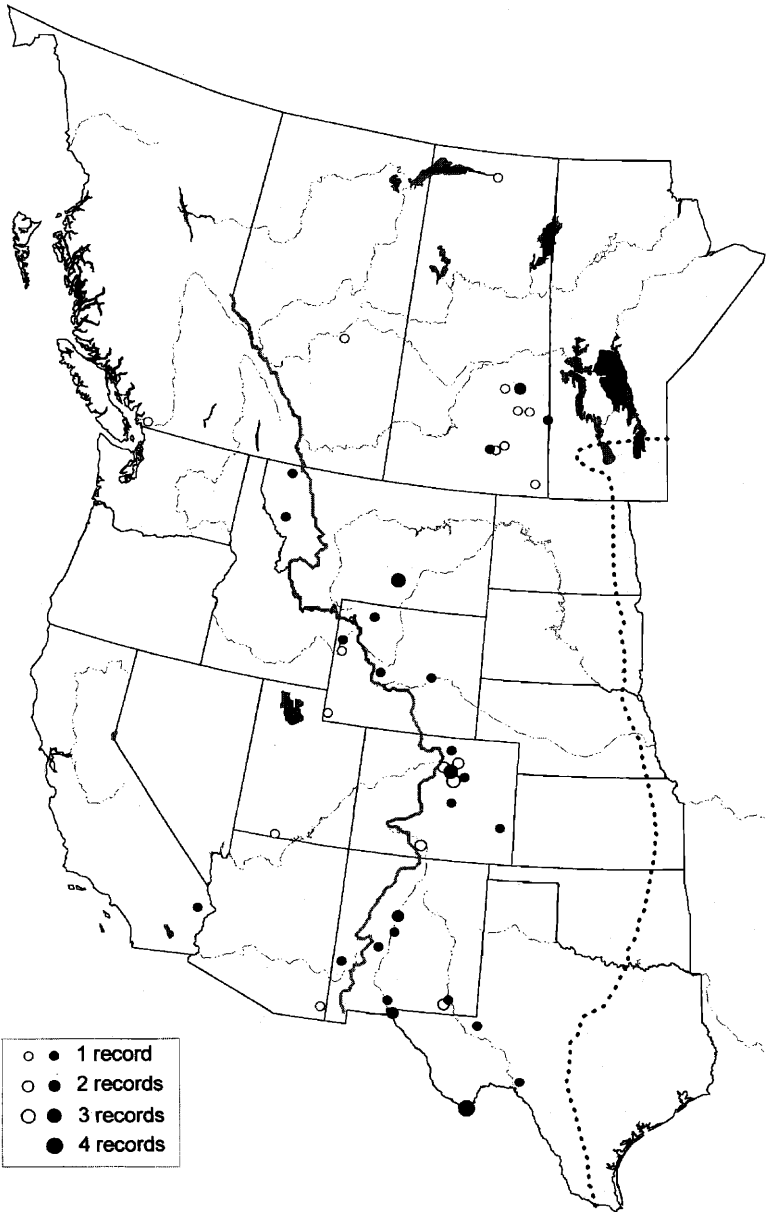


Figure 4. Western edge (dotted line) of regular breeding and wintering distribution of the American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) and locations of extralimital records in the western United States and Canada (Appendix). Solid circles represent well-documented or generally accepted records. Empty circles represent hypothetical or questionable reports. Note that the vast majority of extralimital records are east of the continental divide (gray line).

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New Mexico, and the trans-Pecos region of Texas (Hubbard 1978, DeSante and Pyle 1986, Andrews and Righter 1992, Smith 1996, Peterson and Zimmer 1998). Many reports for Colorado and Saskatchewan are problematic, and all reports for Alberta are generally treated as hypothetical (Salt and Salt 1976:492, Pinel et al. 1991, Semenchuk 1992, *cf.* A.O.U. 1998). This species has wandered south of its normal range to Bermuda (A.O.U. 1998) and in Mexico to San Luis Potosí, Tamaulipas, and even the Yucatan Peninsula (Howell and Webb 1995). It has appeared sporadically during migration northeast of its usual range on the islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon (Tuck and Borota 1972).

There were only four well-documented records of the American Woodcock west of the continental divide prior to the California record: sight records for western Montana at Ninemile Creek (Bergeron et al. 1992, Paulson 1993) and Eureka (Wright 1996), along Sacaton Creek, New Mexico, within sight of Arizona (S. O. Williams *in litt.*), and at Jackson, Wyoming (J. Priddy *in litt.*). A sight report from coastal British Columbia is treated as valid by Paulson (1993) but as hypothetical by Campbell et al. (1990); we follow the latter. There is also a hypothetical report for southeastern Arizona (Monson and Phillips 1981) that has not been reviewed by the Arizona Bird Committee and is thus not on its list of birds recorded in Arizona (Gary H. Rosenberg *in litt.*). One reported at Kanab, Utah, is not considered acceptable (Sorensen et al. 1985).

Records for southeastern Saskatchewan suggest occasional breeding (Rudolf F. Koes *in litt.*). Aside from three anomalous but well-documented July/August records for Colorado and New Mexico, the vast majority of records of vagrants south of Canada have been during the species' normal migration periods (Figure 5). The American Woodcock migrates as early as late September, but the bulk of fall migration takes place between mid-October and early December, with a peak around early November (Smith and Barclay 1978, Keppie and Whiting 1994). It winters as far north as southern Missouri and Tennessee in the interior and Long Island on the Atlantic Coast (Keppie and Whiting 1994).

Some 599 American Woodcocks were released in California from 1972 through 1974 (Table 1) in a failed attempt by the California Department of Fish and Game to establish this species as a game bird (Kidd and Harper 1974). No woodcocks have been released in California since January 1974, although a few persisted in the state subsequently. The last was recorded in 1982 near Santa Rosa, Sonoma County (Sam Blankenship *in litt.*). The released birds were from 663 trapped in Louisiana (64 died in transit); fifteen were subsequently observed or found dead in 1972 and 1973, 11 of them near release sites. As revealed by band recoveries, three individuals dispersed great distances from California (Kidd and Harper 1974): one was hit by a car in Alberta, 20 January 1972, one was found dead at Cummings Lake near Ely, Nevada, 13 March 1973 (see Alcorn 1988:157), and one was shot by a hunter at Blue River in eastern Kansas, 19 November 1973 (Kidd and Harper 1974). These authors attributed a 19 October 1972 sighting 200 km northwest of Anchorage, Alaska, to the California releases, but the record is undocumented and ignored (Theodore Tobish *in litt.*).

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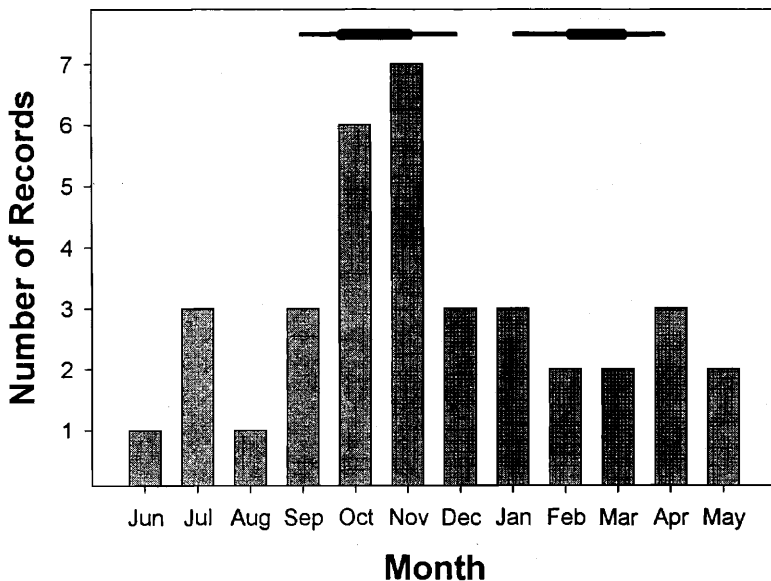


Figure 5. Temporal pattern of extralimital occurrence of the American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) in the western United States and Canada. Bars above the histogram represent its normal migration period (heavier bars are peak periods) in eastern North America (Smith and Barclay 1978).

The bird at Iron Mountain appeared at the peak of woodcock migration in eastern North America, fit the temporal pattern of most other extralimital records of the species (Figure 5), and occurred nearly a quarter-century after the release program in California ceased. Therefore, we conclude this record establishes a first for California of a naturally occurring American Woodcock, a sentiment shared by Sam Blankenship (*in litt.*), who was involved in the release program.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Table 1 Releases of the American Woodcock into California^a

Location	Year(s)	Number
Butte County	1973	29
Colusa County	1972	61
Mendocino County	1972	40
Sacramento County	1972-1974	294
San Joaquin County	1973	33
Sonoma County	1972	61
Sutter County	1972-1973	81
Total		599

^aData corrected from Kidd and Harper (1974), who erroneously reported on releases 19-20 January 1972. Attempts at establishing a game population in the state failed.

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APPENDIX. Extralimital records of the American Woodcock in western North America (the western states and the Trans-Pecos region of Texas). Records we consider valid are preceded by a numeral (i.e., the record was accepted by a local records committee or state authority). A question mark indicates that an exact date for the record is not known. Museum abbreviations: DMNH, Denver Museum of Natural History, Denver, Colorado; NMSU, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces; UNM, University of New Mexico (Museum of Southwestern Biology), Albuquerque; UTEP, University of Texas, El Paso.

1. 9 (not 12) August 1885: Colorado; vic. Denver (Smith 1886, DMNH 14760)
 ? October 1885: Colorado; vic. Denver (Smith 1886)
 “fall” 1887: Colorado; vic. Boulder (Smith 1895)
 “fall” 1887: Colorado; Fort Lupton (Smith 1895)
 8 August 1892: Saskatchewan; Portage (Mitchell 1924, Nero 1963, Houston et al. 1981)
 8 June 1895: Colorado; Denver (Cooke 1897, Bergtold 1917)
 24–30 May 1905: Colorado; vic. Boulder (Henderson 1909)
2. ? September 1906: Wyoming; Cody (Grave and Walker 1913; specimen)
 “before 1927”: Wyoming; Evanston (McCreary 1939:35, Dorn and Dorn 1990:48)
3. 16 September 1945: Colorado; Bennett (DMNH 24766)
- 4–6. 23 October 1917 (3): Montana; Billings (Saunders 1921, 3 specimens)
 19 April 1959 (3): Colorado; Cherry Creek Reservoir (Bailey and Niedrach 1965:325)
 3 December 1959 (5): Colorado; Hot Creek (Bailey and Niedrach 1965:325)
 5 March 1960: British Columbia; N. Surrey (Campbell et al. 1990:487, Paulson 1993)
 6 November 1960: Colorado; Hot Creek (Bailey and Niedrach 1965:325)
 ? 1960: Saskatchewan; Qu’Appelle (Harrison 1960, Houston et al. 1981)
7. 25 January 1964: New Mexico; 3 km n. Mesilla Dam (Harris 1965, NMSU 2767)
 17 April 1965: Colorado; Evans Ranch (Bailey and Niedrach 1965:325)
8. 2 November 1965: Texas; Big Bend National Park (Oberholser 1974:325)
 “since May” 1966: Saskatchewan; Regina (Smith 1996)
9. 29 March 1969: New Mexico; 16 km w. Magdalena (UNM specimen)
10. 15 November 1972: Texas; Big Bend National Park (Wauer 1996)
11. 24 November 1973: Texas; Big Bend National Park (Wauer 1996)
12. 5 July 1974: Colorado; vic. Fort Collins (Andrews and Righter 1992)
 29 September 1974: Alberta; Edmonton (Salt and Salt 1976, Pinel et al. 1991)
 16 February 1976: Arizona; Cave Creek Canyon (Monson and Phillips 1981:42)
13. 16 (not 17) April 1977: Wyoming; Jackson (*Am. Birds* 31:1028, J. Priday in litt.)
 15 May 1977: Wyoming; Jackson (*Am. Birds* 31:1028)
 5–6 May 1978: Saskatchewan; Moose Mountain (Houston et al. 1981)

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14. 26 October 1980: Colorado; Colorado Springs (DMNH 37309)
22 December 1981: Utah; Kanab (Sorensen et al. 1985)
15. 9 July 1982: New Mexico; Isleta (*Am. Birds* 36:1006)
16. 1 October 1983: Montana; Ninemile Creek (Bergeron et al. 1992)
17. 6 October 1983: Texas; Big Bend National Park (Wauer 1996)
13 May 1984: Saskatchewan; Hazel Dell (Smith 1996)
18. 27 December 1984: Texas; El Paso (*Am. Birds* 39:183, photographed)
? February 1986: New Mexico; Rattlesnake Springs (S. O. Williams III *in litt.*)
16 January 1987: New Mexico; Rattlesnake Spr. (*N. M. Orn. Soc. Field Notes* 26(1):7)
? May 1987: Saskatchewan; s. of Preeceville (Smith 1996)
19. 10 November 1987: New Mexico; Albuquerque (*Am. Birds* 42:117, photo)
20. 21 May 1988: Saskatchewan; Duck Mtn. Prov. Park (*Am. Birds* 42:451)
21. 5 September 1988: Montana; Eureka (Wright 1996)
22. 22 June–7 July 1989: Saskatchewan; Somme (*Am. Birds* 43:1331, Smith 1996)
23. 3–4 April 1990: Saskatchewan; Regina (*Am. Birds* 44:446)
24. 2 July–3 September 1990: Saskatchewan; Somme (Smith 1996)
25. 28–30 November 1990: Colorado; Boulder (Andrews and Righter 1992)
26. 12 March 1991: New Mexico; Sacaton Creek (*Am. Birds* 45:482)
27. 19 December 1994–12 January 1995: Wyoming; Lander (*J. Priday in litt.*)
28. 25 January 1995: Texas; El Paso (*Field Notes* 49:167, UTEP specimen)
29. 27 January 1996: New Mexico; Rattlesnake Springs (*Field Notes* 50:204)
30. 22 February 1996: Texas; Devils River State Nat. Area (*Field Notes* 50:190, photo)
31. 7 November 1996: Wyoming; Casper (*J. Priday in litt.*)
32. 5–10 February 1997: New Mexico; Albuquerque (*Field Notes* 51:783, photo)
"early May" 1997: Saskatchewan; Porcupine Plain (*Field Notes* 51:885)
33. 15 December 1997: Colorado; vic. Boulder (*Field Notes* 52:231)
34. 21 April 1998: Texas; Monahans (*Field Notes* 52:355, photo)
35. 3–9 November 1998: California; Iron Mountain (reported herein, photo)
36. 11 May 1999: Colorado; Lamar (*fide* V. A. Truan and B. K. Percival)