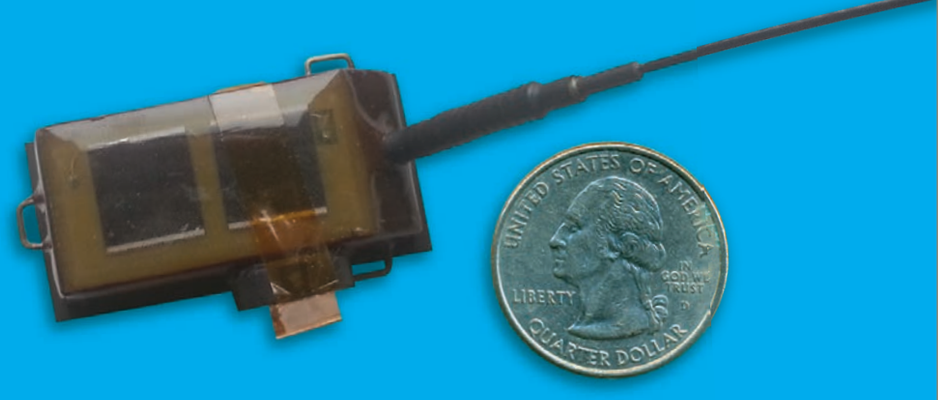
WOODCOCK RESEARCH VIA SATELLITE

RGS and AWS plan to participate in cutting-edge migration research with project cooperators

By ANDREW WEIK, RGS AND AWS REGIONAL WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST

Bird migration has long fascinated conservationists, and we've learned much about the timing and routes of migration over many years of observation as well as banding and recovery of banded birds. However, our learning from band returns is limited by the fact that we have to recover (harvested bird) or recapture (banded bird) to obtain information, and usually we only have two data points – the capture (date and location) and recovery (harvest date and location).



Miniature satellite radio transmitter fit for woodcock. Images provided by USFWS.

Now, timberdoodle enthusiasts are on the eve of enlightenment in regards to the migration behavior of American woodcock. Beginning this winter, researchers from the Minnesota Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, the Arkansas Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Division of Migratory Bird Management, with assistance from state agency and Ruffed Grouse Society/American Woodcock Society wildlife biologists, will capture up to 40 woodcock on wintering grounds in the Central Woodcock Management region (lower Mississippi River Valley) and fit them with miniature satellite radio transmitters. The radio signals transmitted by the marked woodcock are received by the

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Woodcock stopover locations from pilot study – Birds 3 and 6 believed dead. (Bird 3 by owl predation after release)

ARGOS satellite network and relayed back to earth and ultimately to the Arkansas Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit.

This cutting edge research technology will enable the researchers to gain important insights into woodcock migration, including the timing and duration of the spring and fall migrations, location and duration of important stopovers for feeding and resting and where individual woodcock breed and spend the winter. A pilot field season in which 6 woodcock were fitted with satellite transmitters demonstrated that the research methods are sound and yielded encouraging results (Figure above). One adult female, captured during fall 2013 on Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge in Minnesota, successfully migrated south through Iowa, Missouri and Arkansas to spend the winter in east Texas; come spring she migrated back up to Minnesota. During late winter, additional woodcock were captured and similarly fitted with transmitters in Arkansas and Louisiana and subsequently moved north in the spring to Nebraska, New York, Vermont and Maine, with substantial time spent enroute in Alabama, Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, Maryland and Pennsylvania.

The cooperators on the project plan on developing a webpage where the public can follow the movements of individual radio-equipped woodcock as they travel through their annual migratory cycle. RGS and AWS will provide a link to this site on our homepage ***www.ruffedgrousesociety.org*** when the information is ready.

RGS and AWS recognize the potential of this research, as it will identify key areas for woodcock wintering, migration and breeding. "This ground-breaking study will enable RGS and AWS to locate areas in which to focus our American woodcock habitat efforts for all migratory routes from the South to the Great Lakes and Northeast regions," said RGS and AWS President and CEO John Eichinger.

Because of this importance, RGS and AWS is actively raising funds to purchase 20 satellite transmitters for this cutting-edge research. Anyone wishing to make a donation to help purchase transmitters in support of the woodcock migration study may do so online at ***www.ruffedgrousesociety.org*** or by contacting headquarters ***(412) 262-4044.*** ◆

Photo by Nancy Whitehead