

ARIZONA'S FIRST RECORD OF AN AMERICAN WOODCOCK

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On 6 November 2021, I discovered the first American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*) to be documented in Arizona. It was along Cave Creek downstream from the confluence with its South Fork in the Chiricahua Mountains in Cochise County. A species of eastern North America, American Woodcock is a rarity in the western United States.

I first observed the woodcock late in the afternoon from my car as I drove along Coronado National Forest Road 42. At first all I saw were 2 light stripes on the bird's back as it flew low to the ground. It landed at the base of a rocky slope about 15 m away. I saw its long bill, and with its back stripes, I first identified it as a Wilson's Snipe (*Gallinago delicata*), although thinking that the large eyes made it look strange. Snipes also have a plump build, short legs, short tail, and extremely long bill. Wilson's Snipe is a common transient and winter resident in wet areas throughout much of southeastern Arizona, though rare in the Chiricahua Mountains (TAS 2015, eBird 2021). I took a couple of photos through my car window and submitted a checklist with the photo to eBird (Figure 1).

Early on the following morning I met Bob Chapman in Paradise, a small settlement near Portal in the Chiricahuas, and showed him the photos of the "strange" snipe. He immediately exclaimed that the bird was an American Woodcock. My photos clearly showed a buffy, unstreaked belly unlike a snipe, which has barred flanks. It had a larger head and more prominent eye than expected for a snipe. Moreover, its head was not streaked like a snipe's but had thick, black horizontal bars on its crown (Figure 2). Chapman then called numerous birders in Portal, the gateway town to the Chiricahuas, while I corrected my eBird checklist. I had never seen a woodcock before, but I was still embarrassed for making this identification error, as I was a longtime, former member of the Montana Bird Records Committee.

Between 7 and 15 November, some 60 birders observed the woodcock along FR 42 from Vista Point downstream past Stewart Campground to the north end of Idlewild campground, a distance of about 800 m (eBird 2021). The elevation is 1,525 m. This area is in the encinal woodland (evergreen oak) part of the Madrean pine-oak woodland habitat, which stretches from Mexico into the southeastern Arizona mountains. On the slopes above Cave Creek there are a variety of evergreen oaks (*Quercus* spp.), juniper (*Juniperus* spp.), and a few Apache pines (*Pinus engelmannii*). Along the creek bed, Arizona sycamore (*Platanus wrightii*), scattered Arizona cypress (*Cupressus arizonica*), Fremont cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*), and small seep willow (*Baccharis salicifolia*) thickets are found. Intermittent patches of horsetail (*Equisetum* spp.) and a few sedges (*Cyperus* spp.) grow on the edge of the creek. At the time of the sightings, much of the ground near Stewart Campground was moist and covered with fallen leaves, and water was flowing in the creek.



Figure 1. American Woodcock, 6 November 2021.
Photo by Harriet Marble



Figure 2. American Woodcock at Stewart Campground, 8 November 2021. Black bars on head clearly different than striped head of Wilson's Snipe.
Photo by John Yerger

The woodcock was always perched either on the ground or on a rock less than 30 cm high. It flushed when observers got within 6-8 m of it. Most observers only got fleeting looks as it flew fast and low, often disappearing into freshly fallen leaves where its cryptic plumage made it difficult to see (Figure 3). Some birders reported seeing it flush from wet areas with grass and near seep willows. Many reported hearing the abrupt whir of its wings as it burst into flight (e.g., Mukai 2021).



Figure 3. American Woodcock was often seen hiding in freshly fallen leaves, 8 November 2021. Photo by Cathy Beck

American Woodcock is a migratory shorebird found primarily in forested and mixed forest-agricultural-urban areas east of 98°W. It is a casual winter visitor to western Texas, particularly when winters farther north and east are especially cold (McAuley et al. 2020). Colorado has 16 records in 9 counties between 1885 and 2016 (COBRC 2022). Through February 2021, New Mexico has 19 credible records from 8 counties since the first in 1964 (S.O. Williams, New Mexico Bird Records Committee, 22 Feb 2022, in litt.). Woodcocks are accidental in California with 2 November records: a 1998 report in San Bernardino County (Patten et al. 1999) and a second in Riverside County in 2006 (Heindel and Garrett 2008). Nevada's only record was in December 2014 in Clark County (NBRC 2022). There are no records for Utah (UBRC 2021) or Sonora, Mexico (Birdlist 2021).

The closest documented record to Arizona of American Woodcock prior to the Cave Creek discovery was a 12 March 1991 report from Sacaton Creek in western Catron County, New Mexico (Williams and Hubbard 1991). This county is located on Arizona's eastern border. The report was the first of an American Woodcock west of the Continental Divide.

Monson and Phillips (1981) refer to a report of an American Woodcock at the South Fork of Cave Creek Canyon 16 Feb 1976 by L. and R. Duncan. However, that report was neither submitted to nor reviewed by the Arizona Bird Committee. It was also not reported in the *American Birds* seasonal report for Winter 1975-76. Monson and Phillips refer to the report as "hypothetical". If the ABC accepts the 2021 sighting, it will be the first for the state.


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