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AN ELUSIVE VISITOR IN OUR WOODS

I experienced a wonderful treat recently in the woods behind our house. I found a timberdoodle foraging in the leaf litter. I was so thrilled, I froze in place and just admired the beautiful and elusive bird that is so well-camouflaged on the forest floor!

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When I moved to pull my phone out of my pocket to take a picture, the bird flew off. I hightailed into the house to grab my bird-loving husband in hopes we might spot it again. We tiptoed through the understory of young pines and were lucky enough to see it in a tree before it disappeared.

Timberdoodles are not necessarily uncommon, but they are elusive. They like forest openings, young regenerating forest, and abandoned farmland. They are known for their early spring mating rituals. Just before sunrise and just after sunset, in an effort to attract a mate, the male makes a distinctive call of "peent," a flight 300 feet up, and a spiraling dive back to his starting point.

Years ago, my husband and I joined fellow enthusiasts in frigid pre-dawn meadows near Annapolis and another time near Alexandria in hopes of hearing or seeing this treat of nature. Despite braving the weather at that early hour, we only caught a brief glimpse of a woodcock. Locally the Talbot County Bird Club gathers in spring at a more civilized hour for the post-sunset ritual at Pickering Creek where I've heard the birds several times. It truly is a magical moment.

Finding a woodcock right here in our yard was a wonderful discovery. 10-15 years ago, previous owners of our house stopped mowing an area in our mixed deciduous and pine woods and let nature take its course. We are working to enhance the health of those woods by removing invasive plants and nurturing a native understory. That open woods with a high canopy and a thicket of young pines about 10' high is habitat that suits the woodcocks. And having one show up where I could see it certainly suits me!