

The Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*)

Although its name implies that the nighthawk is a raptor like other hawks, it is not. Instead it eats insects and belongs to the Family *Caprimulgidae*, the same family as the Whip-poor-will. It is a small, secretive bird most commonly seen at dusk flying over woods, fields or downtown centers as it catches insects. In cities and towns, it is easily identified by its very distinctive “peent” call.

Identification

The Common Nighthawk is about the size of a dove, 9 inches (22-24 cm.) from tip of bill to the end of the tail. Its wingspan is 21-22 inches (53-57 cm) – similar to that of a Blue Jay. Nighthawks are very well camouflaged with a mottled pattern of browns, black and grey plumage.

In flight, the long, pointed, bent wings have a distinct broad white patch on each outer wing. Their slender shape and erratic flight help identify them as well. Although the sexes are similar, the male has a white bar across the tail and a white throat; the female has no tail band and a pale yellowish beige colored throat. By early August, both male and female young look like adults except that their throat patch is less well defined. They are lighter and more extensively barred on the underside of their body.



Female Common Nighthawk distraction behavior, photo by Stephanie Parkinson.

Occurrence

Common Nighthawks are found from Panama to Canada. After spending winters in South America, they return to New Hampshire in mid May to early June and leave by mid September.

Nesting

In New Hampshire, nesting usually occurs between late May and early August. The female chooses the nest site and eggs are laid between late May and mid July. This species does not build a nest but lays its eggs directly on the ground in an open area, usually on mixed gravel, pea stone, or even bark mulch. There are usually two eggs, creamy white to pale olive, buff or greenish, and speckled with browns and grays. This mottled coloration provides good camouflage.

Nighthawks are usually solitary nesters and naturally nest in open areas such as gravel beaches, burned-over areas and cultivated fields. They began nesting on gravel rooftops, which resemble their natural sites, as early as 1915 in New Hampshire. Unlike pigeons or other familiar city birds, Common Nighthawks do not leave a disagreeable mess around their nest site. They do not bring in any nesting materials such as mud, sticks or grasses but lay their eggs directly on the bare ground. The camouflaged eggs and chicks make the nest site nearly invisible. Nighthawks eat insects which they feed directly to the young. Once the chicks hatch, they move around and most nest sites are extremely clean with no sign of droppings.



Common Nighthawk nest with two eggs, photo by Pam Hunt.

The female usually incubates the egg for approximately 16-20 days. Both parents care for the young, and feed them by regurgitation. On very hot and cold days, the young find protection under their mother, whose belly and abdominal air sacs protect the young from extreme temperatures. In New Hampshire, nighthawks raise only one brood unless the first is destroyed early in the nesting season.

Territory and Nest Defense

Nighthawks rely on camouflage for protection. They do not defend their nest by attacking people. If you approach a nest, the female will usually stay very still, hoping you do not see her. If driven from her nest, she may try to lead you away from her eggs or chicks by faking a broken wing. Young nighthawks that are close to fledging will also remain still, or “unseen.” If you continue to approach within reaching distance, the young bird will quickly run away.

Courtship

Male courtship behavior includes circling above a potential nest site making frequent “peent” calls. At regular intervals the male swoops down to within several yards of the site, and then will turn abruptly upwards. Air whistling through its stiff primary feathers causes a “booming” sound. The Connecticut River Indian tribes believed this sound to be the voice of the Shad Spirit warning the small spring migratory fish, called shad, of their imminent journey upstream. This booming behavior may also be used as a form of defensive behavior towards both humans and other male nighthawks. Males also chase each other, uttering a series of sharply accented calls in rapid succession.

Once a mate has been chosen and both birds are at the nest site, the male alights near the female, spreads and fans his tail from side to side while the rest of his body rocks. The throat is usually fluffed out to reveal a white patch, which is covered when at rest. The male utters guttural croaking notes. The female seems unimpressed. The male may circle overhead while calling. If he approaches too closely, the female may take a short flight. The male then follows and the performance is repeated. It eventually ends with copulation. Males continue aerial peent and booming displays throughout the nesting period.

Feeding and Resting

Nighthawks are voracious insectivores and have helped to control many pests, including the cotton boll weevil. Other foods include locusts, flying ants, carpenter ants, beetles, grasshoppers, plant lice, moths, and mosquitoes. They generally feed at dusk and dawn and occasionally during the day. In downtowns, they can often be seen and heard swooping for insects around street lights and lit towers in the evening. Nighthawks rest during the brightest parts of the day, perched on a tree limb, rooftop or fence rail.

Conservation Status

The Common Nighthawk is listed as Endangered on the New Hampshire Endangered Species list. In North America, Common Nighthawk populations have been rapidly declining over the past couple of decades. New Hampshire Audubon conducted nighthawk surveys in the early 1990s and again in 2001-2002. In the roughly ten years between the surveys the species disappeared from nine of the 13 areas surveyed in both periods, and they became noticeably less common in one of the remaining “strongholds” (the City of Concord). In 2006, although not specifically surveyed, nighthawks were reported from only two towns, Concord and Keene, during the nesting season. A ground-nesting population appears to persist in the protected Ossipee Pine Barrens and natural nesting is confirmed in only two other locations in New Hampshire. The reasons for the nighthawk decline are not clear and could include habitat loss, pesticide use on breeding and wintering grounds and migration hazards. In urban areas, changes in roofing substrate from pea stone to rubber and PVC may also be a factor in their decline.



Common Nighthawk photo by Mark Suomala.

