

Project Nighthawk - Frequently Asked Questions

What is Project Nighthawk?

Project Nighthawk is a statewide research initiative aimed at conserving a state-threatened bird species, the Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*). The “peent” call of the nighthawk was once a familiar sound in cities and towns throughout New Hampshire. The birds, most active at dusk and dawn, nested on flat, peastone gravel roofs and fed on insects—everything from mosquitoes to large moths—attracted to city lights. Nighthawk populations have declined, especially in the eastern U.S. The reasons for their decline are not clear, but one possibility is changes in roofing substrate from peastone to rubber and PVC. As part of this project, researchers are examining the potential for restoring nesting urban nighthawks by placing simple gravel “nest patches” on flat rooftops.

Who is coordinating Project Nighthawk?

New Hampshire Audubon leads the Concord activities and provides statewide coordination for the entire project. The Ashuelot Valley Environmental Observatory (AVEO) manages the Keene effort in partnership with Antioch University New England graduate student Ken Klapper.

Where is Project Nighthawk taking place?

Currently, we are focusing our nest patch installation activities in Concord and Keene, the only two New Hampshire cities in which nighthawks are currently known to occur in summer. If the patches are successful, we hope to expand the project to other towns in the state.

When are nighthawks present in New Hampshire?

Common Nighthawks eat insects and arrive from their South American wintering areas in mid to late May and may nest into late August. However, most observers are likely to notice them in massive groups that migrate throughout the state in the last week of August or early September.

Where did nighthawks nest before there were buildings?

Nighthawks naturally nest in open areas such as gravel beaches, burned-over areas, and cultivated fields. They began nesting on gravel rooftops, which resemble these natural sites, as early as 1915 in New Hampshire

How can I help?

If you are the owner or manager of a building with a large, flat-topped roof, you can help by constructing a gravel nest patch on your building. These consist of “peastone” gravel generally arranged in a 9ft x 9ft square patch. See the Gravel Patch Handbook

(<http://nhbirdrecords.org/Nighthawk/Nighthawk-handbook.pdf>)

for details. By participating, you are assisting research on a declining, state-threatened bird species.

Will I get nighthawks on my roof if I create a nest patch?

It’s hard to say – we certainly hope so! However, since this is an experimental study, we are not sure about the degree to which nighthawks will use these nest patches.

How many birds use a nest site?

Nighthawks nest in single pairs, not colonially. In fact, you would only likely see one parent at the nest at a given time. They usually lay 2 eggs and may have one to two chicks.

How long does it take for nighthawks to hatch and the young to fly?

The female usually incubates the eggs for 16-20 days. Nestlings are downy and active (semiprecocial) their first day but won't make their first flight until they are 18 days old.

I noticed nighthawks diving over my roof, what should I do?

That's fantastic, please let us know as soon as possible! In Keene, contact Brett Amy Thelen, AVEO, brett@aveo.org, 603-358-2065. In Concord or elsewhere in NH, contact Becky Suomala, Project Coordinator, NH Audubon, bsuomala@nhaudubon.org, 603-224-9909 x309.