

PROJECT NIGHTHAWK



by Bob Hines

Project Nighthawk is a statewide research initiative, coordinated by New Hampshire Audubon, aimed at conserving a state-threatened bird species, the Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*). Most active at dusk and dawn, the “peent” call of Common Nighthawks was once a familiar sound in cities and towns throughout New Hampshire, where they nested on flat, peastone gravel roofs and fed on insects attracted to city lights (everything from mosquitoes to large moths). In recent years, rubber and PVC have largely replaced peastone roofing, and nesting nighthawks have disappeared from many New Hampshire towns; in the few towns where they remain (primarily Concord and Keene), their numbers have dramatically declined. Biologists are trying to determine if the loss of the nighthawks is linked to the disappearance of peastone roofs.

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. Since that time much of the birds’ natural nesting habitat has been lost to development and forest regeneration – the Ossipee pine barrens is the only remaining natural nesting location in the state. Now that newer roofing materials have replaced gravel, nighthawk nesting options may have decreased even further. New Hampshire Audubon initiated Project Nighthawk in 2007 to investigate the potential for restoring nesting nighthawks by placing simple gravel “nest patches” on flat rooftops in Keene and Concord. If the absence of nesting sites is a factor in nighthawk declines, biologists hope the gravel patches will lure the birds back. If not, then other factors such as pesticide use, accidental poisoning on their wintering grounds in South America, or migration hazards, may be contributing to their decline. It could be several years before researchers know if the experimental gravel patches make a difference.

New Hampshire Audubon is leading the effort in Concord, placing patches and conducting a coordinated watch. Ashuelot Valley Environmental Observatory (AVEO) and Ken Klapper, a Master’s student in Conservation Biology at Antioch University New England, are spearheading the Keene effort. AVEO is training Nighthawk Patrol volunteers to monitor nighthawks in Keene and Klapper will analyze the data for his thesis research on the relationship between the decline of the Common Nighthawk and the decreased use of peastone roofing in New Hampshire. If results suggest that gravel nest patches are a promising strategy for nighthawk conservation, New Hampshire Audubon plans to expand these restoration and monitoring efforts to other New Hampshire cities that once supported nesting nighthawks.



PROJECT PARTNERS

Project Nighthawk is a partnership that is made possible through the help and support of many volunteers, building owners and managers, sponsors and supporters. Individuals and companies have generously donated time, expertise, and materials. New Hampshire Audubon and AVEO are grateful for this vital support. For more details see the annual summaries of project activities, volunteers and sponsors – www.nh Audubon.org and www.aveo.org.

For more information, contact Becky Suomala at bsuomala@nhaudubon.org or 603-224-9909 x309.



Project Nighthawk – A Partnership

Project Nighthawks depends on volunteers, partners, and supporters. We hope you will help.

- I’d like to volunteer
- I’d like to know more about placing a gravel patch on my flat roof
- I’d like to support Project Nighthawk with a contribution of:
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