

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Species Notes: Nighthawks

A Goat What?!?



That's what most people say when they see or hear the colloquial family name of this fascinating but generally overlooked bird. Its alternate family name 'nightjar' isn't much better at describing it. What bird am I referring to?

Well, it's cousins, the Whip-poor-will and Chuck-wills-widow, are probably more familiar to most but this one does breed in downtown Charlotte. Give up? How about the Common Nighthawk?

Nighthawks aren't all that common in this area but if you do venture downtown on a warm summer evening you can usually see them flying around some of the buildings near CPCC. Actually you will probably hear them first. They have a loud, nasal buzz which 'jars' the stillness of the night hence the name nightjar. (I could even heard it over the hustle and bustle of Bourbon St. in New Orleans one June.) Its genus name *Chordeiles* comes from the Greek 'chorde' referring to a stinged musical instrument and 'deile' for afternoon or evening which is when you are most likely to see the birds. If one had a good imagination (or a very bad ear) one might think its call sounds like a plucked string.

But what does the bird really look like. From the ground looking up they have the appearance of a falcon - very long, pointed wings and tail. They dive and swoop through the air with much stronger wing beats and more gliding than a Chimney Swift. They are also substantially larger than a swift (9 inches as compared to 5 inches). Although the bird appears very dark it has conspicuous white wing patches on the outer part of the wing between the tip of the primaries and the bend of the wrist. The throat is also white and there is some white in its tail.

On the ground, finding these birds is almost impossible. They generally rest/nest on the ground or flat roofs. They are one of the best examples of cryptic coloration in birds. Their plumage pattern of browns, grays and black blend so well into the leaf litter, branch or pebbly ground that they are nearly invisible.

If you do get an opportunity to see one of these guys up close you will be fascinated by the size of their mouth and eyes. All the better to see and eat the insects they 'hawk'. Their large eyes are necessary for their crepuscular (dawn & dusk) and nocturnal habits. The wide gaping mouth is used like a net as they fly. They are almost totally insectivorous, eating everything from large moths, grasshoppers, and beetles to smaller gnats, mosquitoes and flies. One of these birds probably consume more mosquitoes in a single night than a Purple Martin does in its lifetime. Don't you wish you had one living in your backyard?

The bird's peculiar form, nocturnal habits and weird calls have lead to some pretty amazing superstitious beliefs. The most fantastic and wide-



spread is the notion that the birds suck milk from goats and cows which eventually causes their death. This is why the family was at one time called goatsuckers. Of course there isn't a shred of evidence to support this claim. One can only imagine how the rumor got started.

Although the Common Nighthawk breeds throughout most of the United States and lower Canada, they are neotropical migrants. As the insects begin to dwindle they begin to move south. They can often be seen in the Charlotte area in large flocks during the first part of September. I usually start looking for them around Labor Day and have seen them as late as the 25th of September drifting over the UNC Charlotte campus.

This bird also seems make the news every fall when the Panthers start playing at night. The bright lights of the stadium attracted a wide assortment of insects which are these birds favorite food. So they came swooping into the stadium to the delight and puzzlement of thousands of fans. So now when you go to the games in August and early September you can do a little bird watching between plays.



