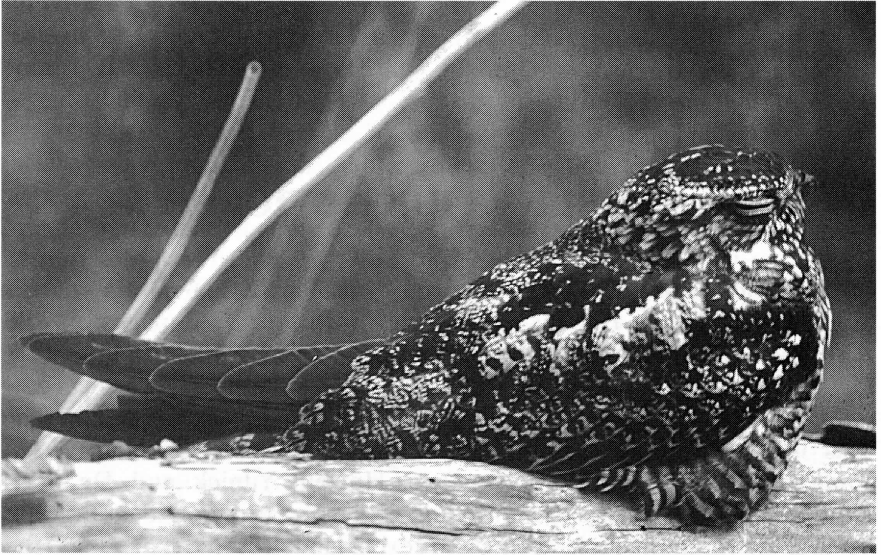


Photo Quiz

Bob Curry



Rather few of our birds sit lengthwise along branches as this bird is doing. What we have is a dark and light bird with mottled, intricate plumage. It displays no legs and feet, a tiny somewhat hooked bill, a large-headed and no-necked appearance, and rather long, pointed wings. Moreover, it is sleeping! Our only birds which combine these features are the Caprimulgidae or nightjars. It is surprising to consider that in a north temperate eastern jurisdiction such as is Ontario, five species of goatsuckers have been recorded.

These may be divided into two

groups. Two species of nighthawks in the genus *Chordeiles* have occurred in Ontario: the Common Nighthawk, which unfortunately is far less common than it once was, and the Lesser Nighthawk, which occurred once at Point Pelee associated with a late April push of tropical air. The other three are true nightjars, although two genera are involved. Alas, the Whip-poor-will also is heard by fewer than it once was in Ontario, but is nonetheless a widespread breeding inhabitant of southern and central Ontario. The Poorwill, a western species, has occurred accidentally on the shore

of James Bay, and the Chuck-will's-widow, a denizen of the hot, humid southeastern U.S., has occurred in summer (and bred) at a few widespread locations, but remains an extremely rare bird, being recorded far less than annually in the province.

All these birds have a white or buff slash across the throat, although the pattern, position and extent of these varies from one species to another. On all three nightjars, the white slash is around the base of the neck, whereas on the nighthawks it covers the throat and chin. Of course, on our subject the relaxed head is sunk into the neck such that only a portion of the white mark may be seen. Nightjar plumage is a composite of subtle browns, golds and blacks offering superb camouflage as they sit on the forest floor. Nighthawks, which frequent open country such as grasslands, deserts, and, in Ontario, Shield outcrops, alvars, sand plains, forest burns and hydro cuts, present a more pale appearance with more contrasts of light and dark. The subtleties on the one hand and the contrasts on the other are the result of distinctive patterns on specific feather tracts. The nightjars have several rows of black-centred scapulars. The nighthawks tend to more uniform feathering in these areas, with broader light or white margins to the feathers. The nightjar primaries are buffy or grey-brown, but with blackish cross bars

and light buffy spots, whereas the somewhat less cryptic nighthawks have plain black primaries. The underparts on nighthawks are strongly barred blackish on white or pale buff.

Being scrub and forest edge hunters, the nightjars have shorter, more rounded wings and longer tails for increased maneuverability. On close examination, what this means results from two structural features. First, the outermost (tenth) primary is shorter than those immediately inward from it. On the folded primaries of a sitting bird, this difference tends to disappear. Second, each of the outer primaries is more rounded and blunt, whereas in the nighthawks these are more tapered to points. The net effect is that on these nightjars the folded wings end short of the tail tip, whereas in the nighthawks the wingtips reach to or beyond the tail tip.

So the subject bird with the rather contrasty plumage, barred flanks and the long, black, tapered wings is a nighthawk. But which one? This bird was photographed by Michael Runtz at Point Pelee in May, just the time and place for another vagrant Lesser Nighthawk to turn up! The slightly smaller size, as is implied in the name Lesser, is useless in species determination. Common Nighthawk tends to be more heavily barred underneath, and there is more contrast with white, whereas Lesser is buffier.

Again, however, these are tendencies only and cannot be used as proof of identity. The critical diagnostic feature is the position and extent of the white patch on the primaries of both species. But in our sleeping bird, the tertials are relaxed and have dropped down to cover the white patch. So is the bird unidentifiable as to species?

Perhaps not. Will Russell, in his own ID Frontiers discussion group entitled BIRDWG01 (available at <http://nbhc.com/birdmail.htm>) offers an excellent analysis of this feature based upon his examination of museum specimens, prompted by a controversial nighthawk photo in *Living Bird*, the Cornell University publication. To understand this feature, it is important to know that the primaries are numbered (1 to 10) from innermost to outermost. On Common Nighthawk, the patch is larger, extending from p10 to p6, while on Lesser, it extends from p10 to p7. This could be seen on a resting bird if the tertials were not relaxed, as they are in the Runtz photo.

The guide books make much of the point that the patch is farther out on the wing in Lesser than in Common. This, as it happens, is real and not just an artifact of the more rounded wing of Lesser (a point to

which we will return briefly in a moment). On Lesser, the patch is positioned approximately opposite the tip of p5, whereas in Common it falls about opposite the tip of p4. Count downwards from the outermost primary on our bird. You will see that the tip and most of the exposed portion of p5 is visible. On a Lesser Nighthawk, the distal edge of the white patch on the folded outer primaries should just be visible, whereas on this **Common Nighthawk** the white patch remains covered by the tertials.

Controversy surrounds the point that primary 9 in Lesser Nighthawk is longer than p10, whereas p10 is longer than p9 in Common Nighthawk. This feature is well illustrated for both species on page 251 of the National Geographic Society guide. The problem is that photos and observations (again, see ID Frontiers) indicate that this feature is not diagnostic, and that on at least some Common Nighthawks, p9 can be longer than p10. Try studying nighthawks closely, especially during fall migration when flocks are overhead (which will not be easy given the erratic flight of nighthawks), keeping in mind that primary proportions may vary even more with juveniles.

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