

THE CONDOR

A Bi-monthly Magazine
of Western Ornithology

Volume XXVI

January-February, 1924

Number 1

[Issued January 21, 1924]

NOTES ON THE LIFE HISTORY OF THE TEXAS NIGHTHAWK

(WITH FOUR PHOTOGRAPHS)

By ROBERT S. WOODS

THE Texas Nighthawk (*Chordeiles acutipennis texensis*) is a common summer resident of the San Gabriel Wash, in Los Angeles County, California, where it rests during the day on the more stony and open patches of ground. In these same situations the two eggs are laid on the bare gravelly or stony soil. Figure 1 shows a set of eggs found on April 27, 1923. They were deposited in a gravelly area covered with low second growth, mostly deer-weed or wild broom (*Syrmatium glabrum*). It may be observed in the photograph that the gravel, which was here loose because of previous leveling of the ground, had been smoothed by the removal of the larger pebbles over a space such as would be covered by the body of the nighthawk. The few stones scattered over it were probably rolled there by the movements of the bird in rising or alighting after the eggs had been laid. The eggs were nearly elliptical and in color pale cream gray, thickly flecked or marbled with gray and brown, harmonizing well with the small stones among which they lay. On one hot day the eggs were moved back several inches into the partial shade of the nearest shrub, being restored to the original position after the warm weather had passed. The mother would remain on her eggs until approached within perhaps ten feet, but after being once disturbed she would not return as long as any person or suspicious object remained anywhere in the vicinity. The other parent, if present in the neighborhood, showed no interest in the family affairs.

The eggs were hatched about May 13 or 14. When visited on May 15 there were two very small downy young of a uniform buff color. The next day the original site proved to be vacant, with the family in a new location about twelve feet away. It was found that the young birds could open their eyes and crawl over the ground at a very fair rate of speed. The second photograph was taken at this time. On each day thereafter that the nighthawks were visited they were in a different place, so that a considerable search was often required. They avoided the grassy places and almost invariably selected a spot in the partial shade of a small bush, never in the complete shade of a large one. It seems probable that the lights and shadows thus produced supplement the protective coloration of the birds.

On May 17 dark markings appeared on back and wings where new feathers had begun to grow. The buff ground color was retained, however, in the new feathers, making the young rather more conspicuous than the parent against the brown or gray



Fig. 1. EGGS AND "NEST" OF TEXAS NIGHTHAWK; AZUSA, CALIFORNIA, APRIL 28, 1923.



Fig. 2. DOWNY YOUNG OF TEXAS NIGHTHAWK; AZUSA, MAY 16, 1923.

background. On May 24 one of the young had disappeared and was not seen again. The remaining one had by this time moved approximately 200 feet from its starting point. When approached on June 2, the mother according to her custom arose with much flapping and with drooping tail fluttered weakly over or through the tops of the bushes, dropping to the ground within sight and lying with outspread wings until convinced that her ruse was not effective. The young bird remained quiescent until alarmed by a closer approach, when it took wing, doubtless for the first time, and flew without difficulty for a considerable distance. It was slightly less than three weeks old at that time.



Fig. 3. ADULT TEXAS NIGHTHAWK COVERING YOUNG. THE BIRD IS WATCHING THROUGH HALF-CLOSED EYES; AN ATTEMPT TO MOVE THE CAMERA NEARER RESULTED IN HER SUDDEN DEPARTURE. AZUSA, MAY 19, 1923.



Fig. 4. YOUNG TEXAS NIGHTHAWK, NEARLY READY TO FLY; AZUSA, MAY 30, 1923.

Two broods are evidently raised, as an immature bird, in company with an adult, was flushed on August 9. The nighthawks were noticeably less numerous during the latter part of the summer, and it is possible that the males and the young of the first brood left in July or earlier.

The flight of the Texas Nighthawk gives the impression of ease to a greater degree than that of any other of our smaller birds. While not slow, it appears leisurely and is frequently varied by periods of gliding. The large expanse of wing gives great buoyancy and the bird seems to float through the air almost without effort, while a turn of the wing serves to change its course at an abrupt angle. The Texas Nighthawk flies at a much lower altitude than is the usual habit of swallows and swifts. While hunting it never ascends to any great height, and often skims close to the ground, passing among the vegetation. In the evening its activities begin about sunset or earlier, usually ceasing before dark, and in the morning it is apt to remain in the air for some time after sunrise. It may sometimes be seen hunting at mid-day, especially in cloudy weather. The nighthawk displays some curiosity and often swoops down within a few feet of one's head. Even at that distance the flight is entirely inaudible.

In general the vocal utterances of the Texas Nighthawk are of three kinds: first, a low soft cluck, repeated slowly; second, a louder, querulous, nasal cry, repeated more rapidly and used when two or more of the birds are together; third, a series of throaty staccato notes delivered in monotone so rapidly as to be almost continuous, sustained for several seconds at a time and resumed after a short pause as if for breath. This trill is sometimes given from the ground, and very frequently while flying. It is used only when the birds are undisturbed and is not ordinarily heard at close range. While the tone is soft, the carrying power is great, and sometimes on summer evenings when several of the nighthawks are about, the air seems filled with an indefinable vibration.

In the San Gabriel Valley the nighthawks arrive early in April and usually leave before the end of August, an individual rarely remaining until September. They migrate as far south as Colombia, where the Texas Nighthawk has been reported by Dr. F. M. Chapman (*Bull. Am. Mus. Nat. Hist.*, xxxvi, 1917, p. 273) as one of the very few land birds of the Western United States wintering in that country.

Los Angeles, September 22, 1923.

CHANGING HABITS OF VAUX SWIFT AND WESTERN MARTIN

(WITH FOUR PHOTOGRAPHS)

By WILLIAM L. and IRENE FINLEY

THE Chimney Swift of the East is a bird that formerly nested in hollow trees or caves; but as the country settled up and there were many chimneys the birds acquired the habit of dropping down into the open flues and gluing their nests on the side amid the soot about eight or ten feet from the top.

It is a rare thing to find the nest of the Vaux Swift (*Chaetura vauxi*) of the Pacific Coast, counterpart of the Chimney Swift of the East. Occasionally during the summer time, I see some of these birds flying over my home. I have never seen them near the ground. It is a bird easy to recognize because of its rapid bat-like flight