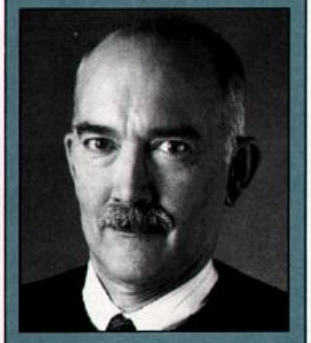
John Farrand, Jr.

MOMENTS IN HISTORY



The Night Hawk, or Whip-poor-will

IF YOU TAKE ANY current eastern field guide and look up the Whip-poor-will, under "Similar Species" you are likely to find only one bird, the Chuck-will's-widow. There probably will be no mention of nighthawks.

The Whip-poor-will and Chuck-will's-widow are indeed similar. Both are nocturnal, secretive, forest-dwelling birds, finely mottled with gray and brown; their mellow but monotonous calls have much in common. The Chuck is larger and browner and has an extra note in its call, but it takes some experience to tell these two nightjars apart in all situations. Sometimes, when you flush one from the forest floor and the bird flies off like a huge moth, it is up and gone before you can decide which species it was.

Given the resemblance between these two birds, it comes as no surprise that they have always been confused by some. Today the name "Whip-poor-will" is used for both species in parts of the South. According to an old saying in rural Alabama: "When the Whip-poor-wills sing 'Chips fell off the white oak,' spring has come." The birds in this saying are Whip-poor-wills, but their call is obviously that of a Chuck-will's-widow. Even the earliest naturalists didn't fully grasp that they are different species.

The Common Nighthawk is another matter. It, too, is a nightjar, but its behavior and habitat are not at all like those of the Whip-poor-will. It likes open country, not forests, and it flies and calls in full view at dusk or even during the day, often over towns. It is also built differently, with longer and more pointed wings and a square-tipped or notched tail. It has a white bar across the wing, and its call is entirely different from anything ever uttered by a Whip-poor-will. Identifying a nighthawk is easy, even for a brand-new birder. If you find a bird resting on a limb, all you have to do is flush it and watch for the white bar on the wing.

The Whip-poor-will and the Common Nighthawk are very different birds. It is not surprising that the Chuck-will's-widow caused a problem, but it seems remarkable, at least to us, that for more than two centuries after the first Europeans arrived in America, both casual observers and experts thought the Common Nighthawk and the Whip-poor-will were one and the same bird.

There are several confused accounts by casual observers, but the most bizarre of these must be one published in London in 1781 by an eccentric clergyman from Connecticut named Samuel A. Peters, who was vigorously opposed to the American Revolution and was forced to flee to England and

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KONSTANTIN

A Common Nighthawk. Photograph/Allan Cruickshank/VIREO.

Canada. In his *A General History of Connecticut*, a savage satire on the Americans, Peters devoted a few paragraphs to birds, including such species as "rens," "flax birds," "dew-minks" (probably Rufous-sided Towhees), and "humilitys" (probably Upland Sandpipers).

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Of the "Whipperwill," Peters wrote that it "has so named itself by its nocturnal songs. It is also called the pope, by reason of its darting with great swiftness, from the clouds almost to the ground, and bawling out *Pope!*, which alarms young people and the fanatics very much, especially as they know it to be an ominous bird. However, it has hitherto proved friendly, always giving travellers and others notice of an approaching storm, by saluting them every minute with *Pope! Pope!* It flies only a little before sunset, unless for this purpose of giving notice of a storm."

Peters then delivered himself of a few caustic comments aimed chiefly at the Puritans. He noted that the bird "sounds forth the fatal words *Pope* in the day, and *Whip-her-I-will* in the night. The superstitious inhabitants would have exorcised this harmless bird long ago, as an emissary from Rome, and an enemy to the American vine, had they not found out that it frequents New England only in the summer and prefers the wilderness to a palace. Nevertheless, many cannot but believe it a spy from some foreign court, an agent of antichrist, a lover of persecution, and an enemy of protestants, because it sings of *whipping*, and of the *pope*, which they think portents misery and a change of religion." In its guise as the "pope," the Reverend Peters's "Whipperwill" is clearly a Common Nighthawk.

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A few early writers wrote descriptions that refer to one species or the other. Nicolas Denys, a French governor of Newfoundland and the surrounding region in the 17th century, wrote a two-volume *Déscription géographique et historique des costes de l'Amérique Septentrionale*, published in Paris in 1672. Of a bird he called the *orfraye*, a name now used in France for the Osprey, Denys wrote: "In summer they are heard crying in the evening. Their cry is not so unpleasant as in France. They cry mounting in the air very high; then they let themselves fall like a stone to within a good fathom of the ground, when they rise again; and this is a sign of good weather." This description appears to be pure Common Nighthawk. The Whip-poor-will doesn't nest farther north than New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, and Denys may never have encountered it.

But even level-headed and experienced naturalists were as confused as Peters was. Plate 16 in the Appendix of Mark Catesby's celebrated *Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*, published in 1748, shows what Catesby calls a "Whip-poor-will." This bird has bristles around its bill

like those of a Whip-poor-will, and Catesby accurately describes the call. But it also has white bars across its wings, like those of a Common Nighthawk; Catesby mentions these bars in his text. The tail is long and buff-colored, like that of a Chuck-will's-widow. Catesby's bird is a mixture of all three species, even though he had already illustrated something he called the "Goat Sucker of Carolina," which, while also a mixture, is enough like a Chuck-will's-widow to be accepted today as the first reasonable description of that species.

Plate 63 in the second volume of George Edwards's *Natural History of Uncommon Birds,* published a year earlier, is labeled "Whip-poor-will or Lesser Goatsucker," but it is a portrait of a Common Nighthawk. In fact, it is a more accurate picture of this species than Catesby's, since Edwards was a better draftsman.

In 1758, Linnaeus added these birds of Catesby and Edwards to the Tenth Edition of his *Systema Naturae,* the foundation of modern naming and classification of birds. He also added to the confusion, by listing them together as a mere variety of the European Nightjar!

There things stood for the rest of the 17th century. John Bartram, the noted Philadelphia botanist, confused the two birds. When his son William published his famous *Travels* in 1791, he came right out and said it: One of the birds he mentions is the "Night Hawk, or Whip-poor-will."

It took the Father of American Ornithology to sort things out. In the first decade of the 19th century, Alexander Wilson of Philadelphia decided to settle the question once and for all. His method was a simple one: he collected 13 birds that were acting like "nighthawks," and shot four obvious "whip-poor-wills" in the woods around Philadelphia.

When Wilson compared these two sets of specimens, the differences were obvious at once. Having also convinced William Bartram, he published his results in the September 1809 issue of *The Portfolio,* a Philadelphia magazine of the day. "After a careful examination of these...differences, it was impossible to withstand the conviction, that these birds belonged to two distinct species of the same genus, differing both in size, colour, manner, and conformation of parts." Then in 1812, in the fifth volume of his *American Ornithology,* he again presented his evidence and gave the Whip-poor-will the name *Caprimulgus vociferus,* which it bears to this day.

Once Alexander Wilson had asked the right question and found the right answer, confusion between the Whip-poor-will and the Common Nighthawk quickly disappeared from books on birds. Audubon, writing two decades later and perhaps with the advantage of hindsight, even assures us that "I have known both birds from my early youth, and I have seldom seen a farmer or even a boy in the United States who did not know the difference between them." Nowadays we all know what these differences are.

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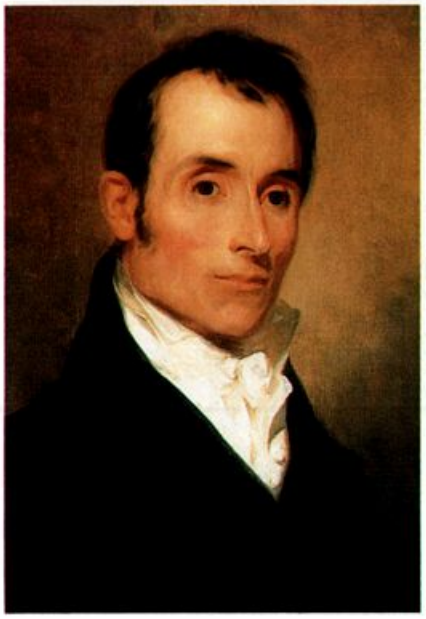
There is a lesson to be learned from the tangled case of the Common Nighthawk and Whip-poor-will. Today the birds of North America have been clearly identified, and thanks to modern field guides, it is relatively easy to learn the differences between them. But it is also easy to take all this for granted. Sorting out these hundreds of new birds was a monumental task. Decades or even centuries of uncertainty, inspiration, and careful thought have gone into what we find on every page of any field guide. Remembering this is not just a matter of logic or common sense. It also makes birding much more fun. ■



Portrait of Alexander Wilson, the Father of American Ornithology, by Rembrandt Peale. Courtesy of the American Philosophical Society.