

## WHIPPOORWILL CALLS

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Although something has been written concerning the vocal powers of the whippoorwill, general statements are the rule and definite facts and figures concerning time of calling, frequency of calls and other details are difficult to obtain. In looking up the available and rather widely scattered literature on the subject, a few statements purporting to throw some light on these questions were found. Some of them may be worth repeating here and will afford a brief historical background for the writer's own remarks.

Concerning the season of the year when the familiar calls of this bird are most frequently repeated Bendire says: "On their first arrival on the breeding grounds this call is especially frequently and rapidly repeated at the beginning of dusk and throughout the early part of the night, sometimes for minutes at a time, without any perceptible intermission . . . . As the breeding season advances they become more and more silent, but they sometimes sing as late as September, never with the vim and persistency, however, as on their first arrival when frequently half a dozen or more of these birds may be heard at the same time, forming a perfect chorus . . ." (*Life Histories of North American Birds*, II, 147-148).

Honeywill writes that in northern Minnesota the calls were heard nearly every night during July "but after the middle of August they were only heard occasionally." (*Auk*, XXVIII, 1911, 234). This observation is confirmed to some degree by Barrows in Michigan who makes the following statement: "On its arrival from the south the Whippoorwill begins to 'sing' almost at once and continues until the young are well grown but according to Bicknell the note is seldom heard after the middle of the year (last of June), although it is well known to sing in the autumn." (*Michigan Bird Life*, 374).

It is apparent that early observers noted some variation in the notes themselves and the frequency with which they were given. It has also been pointed out that the loudness and rapidity of the calls is more or less closely correlated with the time of day or night that the calls are given. On this point Alexander Wilson says: ". . . When two or more males meet, their whip-poor-will altercations become much more rapid and incessant, as if each were straining to overpower or silence the other. When near, you often hear an introductory *cluck* between the notes. . . . Towards midnight they generally become silent, unless in clear moonlight, when they are heard with little intermission till morning." (American Ornithology, V, 72).

Regarding the accents of the notes Nuttall writes: "The first and last syllables of this brief ditty receive the strongest emphasis, and, now and then, a sort of guttural *cluck* is heard between the repetitions, but the whole phrase is uttered in a little more than a second of time." (Manual of Ornithology, I, 616). A further note concerning this peculiar "*cluck*" is given by Cheney: "An eccentric part of the Whippoorwill's musical performance is the introduction of a '*cluck*' immediately after each '*whip-poor-will*'; so that the song is a regular, unbroken, rhythmical chain from beginning to end. One must be near the singer to hear the '*cluck*': otherwise he will mark a rest in its place." (Auk, VIII, 1891, 34)

In commenting on the rapidity and persistence with which the calls are given, Baird, Brewer and Ridgway write: ". . . the cry is so rapidly enunciated and so incessantly repeated that a fertile imagination may give various interpretations to the sounds. They are never uttered when the bird is in motion, but usually at short intervals, when resting on a fence, or bush, or any other object near the ground." (North American Birds, II, 415).

Concerning the time at which the bird apparently prefers to call most frequently, Gentry says: ". . . Its

song is heard during the night, but measurably diminishes in frequency and intensity as the day begins to dawn." (Life-histories of the Birds of Eastern Pennsylvania, II, 90). Allison remarks more specifically along this line concerning the whippoorwill in Mississippi when he says: "The song generally commenced about seven o'clock on clear nights; and once I heard a whip-poor-will cry at five in the morning. I heard none at all in bad weather." (Auk, XXIV, 1907, 18).

The surprising vocal ability of this more or less elusive bird attracted the writer's attention while he was a member of the staff at the University of Michigan Biological Station during July and August of 1919. The Station is located on Douglas Lake in Cheboygan county, Michigan, about seventeen miles south of the Straits of Mackinac. The immediate region is more or less heavily wooded and few habitations are in close proximity to the Station. Owing to the fact that favorable haunts for the whippoorwill are abundant and conditions are suitable for rearing the young, considerable numbers of the birds remained continuously near our camp. Excellent opportunity was thereby afforded for securing definite data on the calls.

On several occasions counts were made of the number of consecutive calls given by one bird as well as the number of intervals and length of time occupied by each between the *series* of consecutive calls. The results are brought together in tabular form in this paper. In all cases counting was discontinued when the interval was excessively long or when we no longer could be sure that we were listening to the individual bird with which our counts started.

In our experience, the calls were invariably more frequent on warm, calm evenings. Scarcely any calls were given on windy nights. In the early part of July the birds began calling about 9:00 p. m. and it was a noteworthy fact that the calls started regularly within fifteen minutes of this hour. As the evenings became longer and dusk

settled earlier, the time at which the birds first called was advanced somewhat.

Professor Frank Smith of the University of Illinois who was present at the Station also became interested in the calls of this bird and in his experience the birds called more continuously in the early morning. On July 1 he counted 369 calls with but exceedingly brief intervals, so that for all practical purposes the calls may be considered as consecutive.

July 3, 9:00 P. M. The birds began to call shortly before this hour and the particular individual recorded here had given five or six calls before counting was begun. Our results on this bird were as follows: 57 calls; interval of about 10 seconds; 123 calls; interval very brief; 112 calls. Total, 294 calls with scarcely an interruption.

July 5, 9:00 P. M. 396 calls with but 3 intervals, the first two of which were of not more than 2 seconds each in duration while the third interval was of about 5 seconds' duration.

July 6, 9:00 P. M. 51 calls; interval; 167 calls; interval; 26 calls; interval; 10 calls; interval; 72 calls. Total, 326 calls with three intervals. No interval was of more than 5 seconds' duration. Counting was discontinued after an interval of more than 5 minutes. (Count by Mrs. Stoner).

July 12, 5:00 A. M. 51 calls; interval brief; 462 calls without the slightest intermission; interval brief; 47 calls; interval brief; 24 calls; interval brief; 126 calls. Total, 710 calls with 4 intervals of varying lengths but none of more than a few moments duration. The count was made by Professor Smith while the bird was perched on the top of his tent.

July 25, 8:15 P. M. The calls of the whippoorwill are now becoming fewer, and less prolonged and are more irregularly given than those observed during the latter part of June and the first half of July. In addition, the intervals between calls are proportionately longer. The birds

began calling this evening at 8:15 which is at least a half hour earlier in the day than this performance began a week ago. The following count was made on one individual and is a fair example of others: 9 calls; interval  $2\frac{1}{2}$  minutes; 9 calls; interval  $2\frac{1}{2}$  minutes; 16 calls; interval brief; 4 calls; interval brief; 9 calls; interval longer; 4 calls; interval 1 minute; 7 calls; interval 2 minutes; 9 calls; interval short; 6 calls. Total, 66 calls.

August 2. The first call of the evening was noted at 8:35. But few calls were given after 9:00 p. m. 5 calls, slow; interval brief; 6 calls, slow; interval 1 minute; 6 calls, slow and irregular; interval 1 minute; 1 call; interval 3 minutes; 9 calls with brief interval between call 8 and 9; interval 3 minutes; 4 calls; interval brief; 6 calls, irregular; interval 2 minutes; 6 calls; interval  $1\frac{1}{2}$  minutes; 5 calls; interval 1 minute; 7 calls; interval 3 minutes; 4 calls; interval 4 minutes; 10 calls; interval 5 minutes; 4 calls. Total, 73 calls, the total time occupied by intervals between the calls amounting to about 25 minutes.

August 4. The calls began at 8:30 p. m. After 9:15 scarcely any calls were given. 4 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 5 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 2 calls; interval 5 minutes; 10 calls; interval 1 minute; 14 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 10 calls; interval 1 minute; 11 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 16 calls; (the preceding 5 *series* of calls were very irregularly given); interval 3 minutes; 14 calls, rapid; interval 4 minutes; 9 calls. Total, 95 calls.

August 5, 5:00 A. M. 240 calls, not more than 1 or 2 seconds' interval between any of them so that they were practically consecutive; 118 calls; interval brief; 50 calls; interval brief; 38 calls. Total, 446 calls. In no case was the interval more than 1 minute. (Record by Professor Smith.)

August 6, 4:25 A. M. 95 calls, very irregularly given; interval about 1 minute; 5 calls; interval momentary; 19 calls; interval momentary; 5 calls; interval 1 minute; 10 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 13 calls, very irregularly given;

interval 1 minute; 8 calls, very irregularly given. Total, 155 calls.

August 12, 8:25 P. M. Heard no calls before this hour. Evening still and moderately warm. 9 calls; interval 2 minutes; 12 calls, first 6 rapid, second 6 slow. Total, 21 calls. Other calls were not heard up to 9:25 p. m., either from this or any other bird.

August 15, 8:20 P. M. First calls given at this hour. Evening clear, cool, calm. 12 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 12 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 7 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 6 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 9 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 10 calls. Total, 56 calls.

August 15, 8:24 P. M. 7 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 3 calls; interval momentary; 34 calls, last 20 slow, irregular, labored; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 19 calls; interval momentary; 10 calls; interval momentary; 14 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 4 calls; interval momentary; 8 calls; interval momentary; 2 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 4 calls; interval momentary; 13 calls, irregular, slow; interval momentary; 7 calls; interval 5 minutes; 7 calls. Total, 132 calls. Other calls of the species were not heard for 10 minutes.

August 16, 5:00 A. M. 10 calls; interval 2 minutes; 5 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 7 calls; interval  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute; 2 calls; interval 5 minutes; 9 calls. Total, 31 calls. The calls given at this time seemed to be a little more rapid and regular than those given in the evening.

#### TABULAR SUMMARY

Date	Time	Tot. No. calls	Tot. No. intervals	Remarks
July 1,	5:00 A. M.	369		Intervals brief
July 3,	9:00 P. M.	294	3	Intervals very short
July 5,	9:00 P. M.	396	3	Intervals very short
July 6,	9:00 P. M.	326	4	Intervals short
July 12,	5:00 A. M.	710	4	
July 25,	8:15 P. M.	66	8	Intervals longer
Aug. 2,	8:35 P. M.	73	12	Intervals very long
Aug. 4,	8:30 P. M.	95	9	Intervals irregular
Aug. 5,	5:00 A. M.	446	5	Intervals brief
Aug. 6,	4:25 A. M.	155	6	Intervals irregular
Aug. 12,	8:25 P. M.	21	1	
Aug. 15,	8:20 P. M.	56	5	Intervals short
Aug. 15,	8:24 P. M.	132	12	Intervals very irregular
Aug. 16,	5:00 A. M.	31	4	Intervals long, irregular

## GENERAL SUMMARY

1. The average number of consecutive calls apparently diminished in direct proportion to the advancing season.
  2. The hour at which the evening calls began also averaged earlier (by the clock) as the season advanced.
  3. The calls were more *vociferous* and more rapidly given at the beginning of the season. In fact the calls sometimes were given so rapidly that it was difficult to count them.
  4. The calls became more labored and irregular and the 'cluck' more audible toward the end of the summer.
  5. The length of interval between series of calls increased as the season advanced. Both the energy and the incentive for protracted calling were probably lacking toward the close of the breeding season.
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BIRDS OBSERVED NEAR MINCO, CENTRAL  
OKLAHOMA — AN ADDITION.

In the *Wilson Bulletin* for 1918<sup>1</sup> in the numbers for March and June the writer published a short paper entitled "Birds Observed near Minco, Central Oklahoma," giving a synopsis of field observations made at that locality in 1905. This article, as originally written, and as it appeared when read in galley proof, covered a list of 62 species. For reasons unknown when the printer came to make up pages for the June number, the last four species (numbers 59 to 62) of this list were omitted. Later when he printed author's separates of this article the missing matter was discovered, put in at the proper place and then printed, while in addition the pagination and arrangement of the second installment were changed to make them consecutive with the first. This was not discovered until a short time ago.

In order to make current the additional information contained in the author's separate the four species omitted in the original are herewith reprinted as they should have appeared in the Volume for 1918, page 61.

<sup>1</sup> *Wilson Bulletin*, Vol. XXX, March, June, 1918, pp. 2-10, 56-61.