

(Will Stuart)



Caprimulgidae the NIGHTHAWKS and NIGHTJARS

Nighthawks and nightjars are part of a worldwide family of birds that total 98 species. As they are largely nocturnal, many people are unfamiliar with them. They are often called “goatsuckers” due to an ancient superstition. Early Europeans believed these mysterious birds would fly in at night and use their peculiarly wide mouths to steal milk from the udders of mother goats, often leaving them dry or blind. In reality, these supposed “goatsuckers” are primarily insect eaters who spend their nights darting about in the sky, scooping and sucking up as many insects into their wide mouths as they can. In addition to the size of their mouths, goatsuckers are known for their soft plumage, long wings, and short bills and legs. In North America, these and many other aerial insectivores are, as a group, in serious decline.

Five species in the family Caprimulgidae have been documented in the Carolinas, but only three are of regular occurrence. All three of these cryptically colored birds are found in the Carolina Piedmont, and all three are breeders here. They are the Common Nighthawk and its two close relatives, the Chuck-will’s-widow and the Whip-poor-will. Each has the characteristic wide “goatsucker” mouth and is a crepuscular or nocturnal insect hunter. Each rests during the day often perched lengthwise on horizontal branches, almost completely camouflaged. Ornithologists are unequivocally certain each of these three birds is a separate and distinct species from the others, but despite their assurances, some Carolinians have been arguing over this fact for almost a century.

This contentious public argument was ongoing in the Carolinas at least as early as the 1880s. One side firmly believed the Bull-bat (Common Nighthawk) was in fact the same bird as the Whip-poor-will. The other side, supported by the practitioners of modern scientific ornithology, steadfastly claimed the birds to be two distinct species. The ornithologists and their supporters’ claims were summarized in the *North Carolina Herald* newspaper on September 23, 1886:

You will see by the Whip-poor-will killed and shown you by myself that there is a difference between it and the Bull-bat. The Whip-poor-will has four white feathers in his tail, while the bat has none; has no white at all in his wings, while the bat has. He is very much darker, has a mouth nearly twice as large as a bat’s, and is seemingly very much larger while he is really smaller—will not weigh more than two-thirds as much as the bat. They do not look alike when put together. Yours, W.R. Barker...[and the editors added:] In addition to the above we wish to state that we were shown two eggs, one of the Bull-bat and the other of the Whip-poor-will, which were entirely different in shape, color, and pattern.

The editors followed this up a week later with a detailed natural history account of both these birds that they adapted from a published ornithological reference. However, the debate continued. Almost 20 years later, on September 26, 1903, *The Charlotte Observer* wrote: “The Lumberton Argus wants the Observer to stand up like a man and answer these questions: ‘Is a will-o’-the-wisp, or jack-o’-lantern, only a handful of lightning bugs travelling together? Do poisonous snakes bring forth their young and only non-poisonous ones lay eggs? Is a bullbat a whippoorwill?’ ” The *Observer* responded simply: “Blamed if the Observer knows the answer to a single one of them, brother.” Six years later, on October 30, 1909, they wrote: “And there now comes along another weekly paper [Greensboro] with an effort to start discussion on the never-to-be-settled question whether the bullbat and the whippoorwill are the same or different species of birds.”

The argument was picked up later that year in the *News-Herald* in Morganton. One example of which is a lengthy editorial letter written by Esq. William Sparks that notes “a neighbor of mine several years ago wounded a bull-bat, caught it and placed it in a cage, and after a few days, when it had gotten better it hollered ‘whippoorwill’ nearly every night,” and “I have another witness in Judge Avery that there is no difference in the bullbat and whippoorwill. The Judge says when he was a boy he killed and ate bull-bats and they were known as whippoorwills,” and ends with “[t]hey speak of difference in color, length of tail, etc. That doesn’t cut any ice, for you will find this difference in lots of birds of the same family. I was brought up right in the heart of nature, and these town folks who know only what they read in the books can’t make me believe there is any difference in the whip-poor-will and the bull-bat.” The state museum’s Assistant Curator of birds published a very lengthy rebuttal trying to explain the difference between the habitats of the

two birds, their calls, even their nest sites, but many remained unconvinced. In fact, this argument continued for many years across North Carolina.

As late as the 1970s, wildlife experts were being asked to respond to this same question. One letter to the editor of *Wildlife in North Carolina* went like this: “Dear Sir, Could you please inform me if the whip-poor-will is the same bird as we call the bullbat. This could settle a hot argument for us. Sincerely, Cecil Hargrove Wilmington” Chief Rod Amundson provided this excellent response. “Dear Mr. Hargrove: We are always in technical trouble when we use common or colloquial names for wildlife. In general usage, however, the bullbat and nighthawk are the same species. The whip-poor-will is of the same family (Caprimulgidae) but of a different genus and species.” Thankfully, recent advances in DNA analysis have added additional proof that these are indeed three distinct species, and, hopefully, this century-old debate should now have finally run its course.