

Chuck-will's-widow *Antrostomus carolinensis*

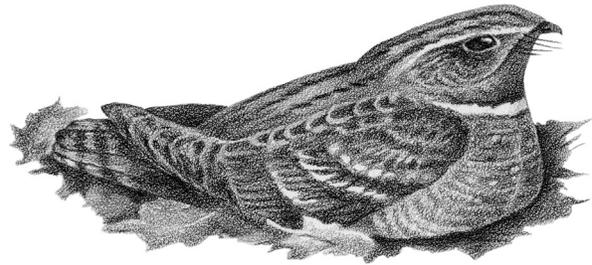


Folk Name: Chick-a-willa, Twixt-hell-and-the-white-oak,
Dutch Whip-poor-will

Status: Breeder

Abundance: Rare to Uncommon

Habitat: Open woodlands near open fields



The Chuck-will's-widow is our largest nightjar. At 12 inches, it is more than 2 inches larger than the robin-sized Whip-poor-will. It gets its common name from its call that begins with a sharp, low *chuck* followed by a louder *will's-widow*. This goatsucker looks very much like its close relative the Whip-poor-will, but their two calls are distinctly different.

These birds are hard to distinguish by sight, but several differences are evident. The Chuck's throat is a buff brown underscored by a white necklace, while the Whip's throat appears almost black against its white necklace. The male Whip has several bold white outer tail feathers, while the tail feathers of the male Chuck have reduced white patches, outlined in buff. Chucks appear reddish overall, while Whips appear gray brown. Both of these birds have more rounded wings than those of the Common Nighthawk, and both are more nocturnal in behavior, less prone to fly at dawn or dusk than the nighthawk. Their eyes shine brightly at night when illuminated by the beam of a flashlight.

The Chuck-will's-widow is a summer resident throughout this region. Most spend the winter in Mexico, Central America, the West Indies, and South America. In spring, these birds head north to breeding sites in the central and southeastern United States. Nightjars seldom call during early and late migration, making them very hard to find on their way to and from their breeding grounds. In this region, spring migrants arrive in April. Breeding begins almost immediately after males have established their territories. Females lay two eggs directly on the ground, but finding an actual nest is difficult and quite rare. Most head south again by late July or early August.

Our earliest reported arrival date is 19 March in 2002. Marek Smith shared: "I heard a Chuck-will's-widow at Reedy Creek Nature Preserve tonight at 6:34 pm. ... The bird stays beneath the loblolly pine trees...when he starts to call, you'll know it! (very loud)." Our latest date is a bird reported in Rock Hill by June Conway on 30 September in 1981 which, for this species, is a very late fall date indeed. We have no records from October through February. Our highest count is six birds tallied by Irvin Pitts in Chesterfield County on April 26, 2015. Our highest elevation for this species was a pair Harry LeGrand heard calling in the Brushy Mountains in Alexander County on



J F M A M J J A S O N D

July 3, 2009.

Chucks spend their daylight hours roosting on the ground or perched lengthwise on a horizontal branch or fence post. Their cryptic coloration allows them to blend in so well that they look like a bump or lump. Elizabeth Clarkson shared several reports of birds found roosting in her garden in Charlotte:

Sylvia, the Russian Wolf Hound, flushed a Chuck-will's-widow from the leaves near the oak tree and we watched it where it settled for about ten minutes within 8 feet of it. Eddie got the camera and I took a picture of it but I'm sure it wasn't good as it is too shady. All of the birds fussed the entire morning and we couldn't find anything except the Chuck-will's-widow. We did try to kill a snake but it got away. Rosetta was about to knock the Chuck-will's-widow out of the tree with a stick of wood when I stopped her. She thought it was an owl. ... Just before dinner Eddie and I looked at the Chuck-will's-widow again. He was still on the same lower limb of the pine tree with his big eyes closed to narrow slits.

Clarkson later reported that her garden songbirds would harass any Chucks that chose to linger there. "Once a family of Bluebirds left the nest while a Chuck-will's-widow was in the garden, and they were as excited as if he'd been a hawk." This is not surprising as, though they are primarily insectivorous, these birds won't pass up the chance to snatch a small bird. One North Carolina Chuck was found to have a whole Carolina Wren in its stomach.

At night, Chuck-will's-widows forage for food. Male Chucks call throughout the night, especially during the months of May and June. Rhett Chamberlain published detailed records of the calling rates of both Chuck-will's-widow and Whip-poor-will that he "clocked" during the summer of 1952 at "Crittter Hill," his property in the Town of Matthews:

The Whip-poor-wills were always faster than the Chucks and seemed to keep at it longer. Early in the season, both species stayed close by the house; occasionally one would sit along the main ridge of our roof. But by September we strained our ears to hear them away off in the deeper woods. Early in the season they were heard from dusk to dawn, diminishing in the wee hours.

During late May when the birds had established their territories, he clocked the Chuck-will's-widow calls at an average rate 29.1 calls per minute. The Whip-poor-will calls averaged 45.5 calls per minute. The calling of both nightjars "slowed down appreciably" by July after breeding was over. His "Chucks" stopped calling by 17 July and appeared to have moved out, but the Whip-poor-wills continued to call intermittently until 16 September.

In the late 1870s, Leverett Loomis confirmed both species as breeding birds in Chester County. He described the Chuck as "rather common" and the Whip as "common" in summer. Elizabeth Clarkson reported all three goatsuckers as common summer breeding residents in Mecklenburg County from the 1930s through the 1970s. Today, the breeding ranges of the Chuck and the Whip still overlap here in the Central Carolinas. However, the overall ranges of both these species appears to have both advanced and receded somewhat over the past century or more in both Carolinas.

In 1955, A.L. Pickens of Queens College in Charlotte, summarized historical changes in the distribution of both species in *The Chat*. In his article, he explained variations in their ranges were documented as early as the 1860s in upstate South Carolina. At that time, the Chuck advanced (described as its northern infiltration) and the Whip population receded. He wrote: "[T]he Chuck-will's-widow seems to be expanding into areas beyond the pine belts of the southeastern states. It is a fascinating problem in zoogeography." Pickens noted that as of the time of the article: "It is pleasant to find that the Whip-poor-will still holds so far south as the Charlotte area."

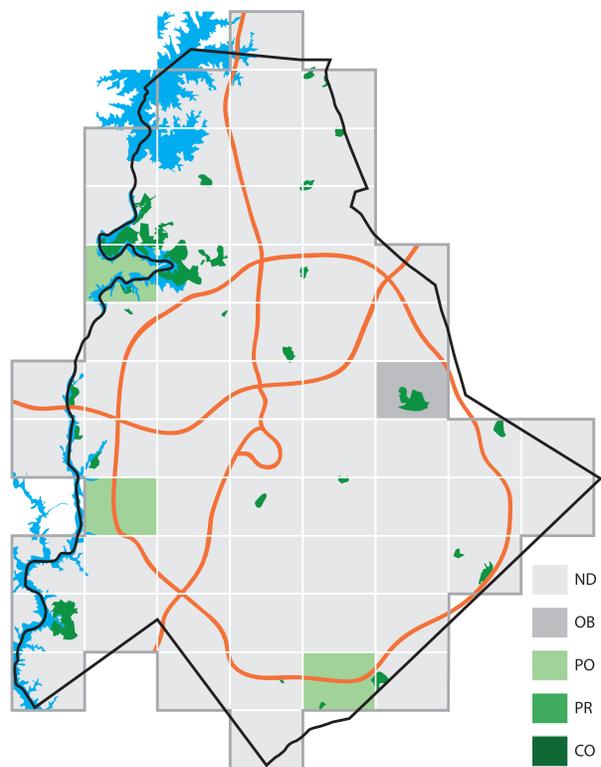
Forty years later, ornithologists were reporting on the slow expansion of the Whip into the Coastal Plain. Dave Lee, Curator of Ornithology with the North Carolina State Museum, reported evidence showing "Chuck-will's-widows are being replaced by Whip-poor-wills in some Coastal Plain areas." In 2003, South Carolina ornithologist John Cely provided this thoughtful assessment of today's situation: "The relationship between the Whip-poor-will and Chuck-will's-widow, and their habitat requirements needs more study, especially because of the overlap of their breeding ranges. Our current understanding of their habitat needs is inconclusive and sometimes contradictory."

Sadly, the breeding populations of both species have recently experienced such dramatic declines in the United States that some biologists have categorized it as

"a population crash." The Chuck-will's-widow was one of several neotropical migrants that showed "highly significant declines" in a summary of decades of federal Breeding Bird Survey trend data published in 1996, and these declines have continued. The national Nightjar Survey Network implemented in 2007 is a network of citizen scientists who are collecting data on nightjar breeding locations. Preliminary results indicate both Chucks and Whips are still breeding in most counties in the Central Carolinas. No Chuck-will's-widows were found on Nightjar Surveys conducted in Mecklenburg County.

In Mecklenburg County, the Chuck-will's-widow may now be lost as a breeding bird. BBA volunteers were unable to confirm any Chuck-will's-widows breeding in the county during the recent atlas survey. This is despite repeated targeted searches in appropriate habitat. "Possible" was the highest level of evidence recorded in three blocks, and "Observed" was recorded in one additional block. A once dependable spot on Dixie River Road is now being developed into one of the largest mixed-use developments in Charlotte history.

The Chuck-will's-widow is listed on the Yellow Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is a species with both "troubling" population declines and "high threats." It is in need of conservation action.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Possible (PR/0, CO/0)