

Common Nighthawk *Chordeiles minor*



Folk Name: Bullbat, Mosquito Hawk, Moth Hunter

Status: Migrant and local Breeder

Abundance: Rare to Uncommon

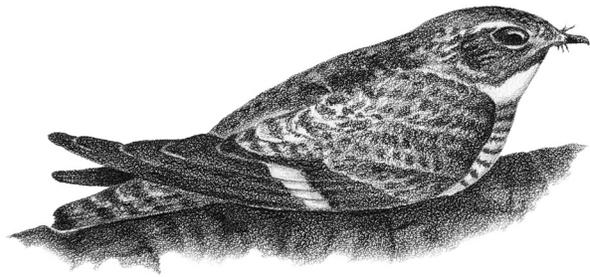
Habitat: Nests on gravel roofs of flat-topped buildings—
aerial insectivore

The Common Nighthawk is best distinguished from the Whip-poor-will and the Chuck-will's-widow by its call and an obvious white bar about two-thirds of the way out to the tip of its pointed wings. Its one flight call has been variously described as “a loud nasal *peent*,” “a sharp electric *peent*,” *pee-yah*, *cheap*, or even an ethereal *beard*, sounding like the word when it is whispered. The nighthawk is well known for its aerial acrobatics and for making sharp, perpendicular dives towards the ground while creating a strange, hollow “booming” noise with its wings that sounds to some “like blowing into the bunghole of a barrel.”

Nighthawks generally arrive in this region during the third week of April. Most spring migrants are reported in small numbers. In the late 1800s, R.B. McLaughlin reported them arriving in Statesville as early as 23 April. Our earliest recorded arrival date is of one bird seen over Crowders Creek in York County on March 31, 2004.

Fall migrants are reported beginning in late August, and virtually all are gone by the end of October. Large numbers have been reported in September and October, and these large groups often move through in a relatively short time period. In Charlotte, on October 8, 1928, William McIlwaine wrote: “About two weeks ago I saw considerable numbers of ‘bull bats’ in migration. Saturday I saw one lone fellow.” Instead of large groups, Tom and Tammy Sanders carefully recorded fall migrants seen trickling through in October 2013: “We have been seeing Common Nighthawks on a daily basis here in Charlotte, NC. Tonight was the 18th evening in a row and 22 out of 24 evenings in which we have had at least one and up to five birds. We really expected the birds to leave when the latest cold front pushed through but they are still around, showing up about 6:35 pm like clockwork.” They recorded their latest bird that fall on 6 November, providing the latest date for this region. These migrants spend the winter in South America.

Highest numbers recorded in the region were tallied in the 1940s. Elizabeth Clarkson and Rhett Chamberlain observed the migration of groups of Common Nighthawks in Charlotte at two different locations on September 9–11, 1946. On the evening of 11 September, Clarkson reported: “I was watching Nighthawks fly south over my garden, when I decided to count those which were visible from my glider on the terrace...I counted 187, and



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during one 15 minute period there were 41. My garden is enclosed by tall trees, so the birds were being counted on a very small patch of sky.” On Chamberlain’s best night, he counted over 300 in a 30-minute period from his vantage point overlooking several city blocks. Fall flocks of 100–200 birds were still being reported in the late 1990s. Fans of the Carolina Panthers could see them foraging in the lights around the skyscrapers of downtown Charlotte, during and after fall games.

Nighthawks historically bred throughout the Carolina Piedmont on open plowed ground or open areas of clay or sand or fine gravel. Over the past century or more, their breeding sites have changed to the gravel-lined roofs of flat-topped buildings. They lay two dark eggs, heavily spotted with grays and blacks, in late spring or early summer. Today, almost all nesting in the region is believed to occur on buildings and not on open ground. In Charlotte, Common Nighthawks were found nesting several years in a row on top of the Central High School building (now CPCC) during the 1950s, and Elizabeth Clarkson confirmed “nests on top of downtown buildings as recently as 1982.”

In this region, nighthawks have long been known by their colloquial name “bullbats,” and for generations of Southerners, the call of the bullbat was the first sign of fall. In the late 1800s, there were anecdotal accounts of massive numbers of bullbats migrating through the Carolinas, and bullbat shooting was a popular fall sport enjoyed by residents throughout the region. In fact, some teachers would release their students from class early to join the hunt during the height of bullbat season.

“Bull-bat shooting is now ‘on’ and the amateur sportsmen are waging warfare upon them. It generally takes fifteen shots to bring down one bull bat.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, September 6, 1878

“The boys were out shooting bull-bats yesterday afternoon and found thousands of ‘em. There was a constant firing all around the city,” and “[t]he sport of bull-bat shooting was at its best yesterday afternoon.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, August 8, 1879,
and August 16, 1879

“Becoming excited he fired without proper aim, when lo and behold! Twelve bull-bats came down, besides, when he went to pick them up he found three or four sparrows which he had also killed. Well, who can beat this?”

—*North Carolina Herald*, July 28, 1887

“...in regards to the shooting of bullbats on the hill near the end of the avenue every evening. A dozen or more sportsmen are said to gather there just before dark and loads of shot are scattered in every direction.”

—*Citizen-Times*, August 16, 1900

In fact, there are accounts that remarked how little fear bullbats had of people and that they were so numerous that people stood on roof tops killing them with sticks as they swooped down low, just to see who could kill the most. C.E. Bradshaw of Charlotte reported “when he was a boy nighthawks were so plentiful during migration that the boys, being unenlightened by modern ideas of conservation, could get up on top of a barn or other building, and knock them out of the air with sticks as they flew over.”

In the late 1800s, there was a growing awareness of the importance of bullbats and other insect-eating birds to our agricultural economy, and there was a growing movement to stop the widespread killing of these and many other species of birds. Many citizens cried out for laws to protect the birds, and soon these requests were answered.



Common Nighthawks are easily identified by the white marks on the undersides of their wings when in flight, as shown in this Cabarrus County bird. (Phil Fowler)

“How long will it be now, before a great many of our young men will be out every evening they can be spared from their occupations, with no other objective in view than the heartless and senseless amusement of killing bull-bats for mere killing’s sake or wounding them so they may perhaps suffer for days and then die.”

—*Carolina Watchman*, May 16, 1889

“The bull-bat, as before said, is the friend of the husbandman, for he assists no little in clearing out these destructive pests which prey on young growing plants.

And yet thousands of them are yearly slaughtered by sportsmen who shoot them as they fly over the fields in the late afternoon catching the insects that swarm in the air.” —*Citizen-Times*, November 14, 1902

The Charlotte News and other papers across the state published “An Appeal for Bullbats” in June 1903 advising all state citizens that the new “Audubon Bill” had become law, and bullbats and many other species of birds were now protected. They asked the “good people of the State to use their influence in every way possible on behalf of the bullbat.”

On September 10, 1903, *The Charlotte News* published an editorial in support of the recent establishment of the Mecklenburg Branch of the Audubon Society and the new laws, but in it they also warned against taking these new state and local bird protection laws too far. They specifically recommended to exclude the tasty bullbat from protection:

We have been in sympathy with the aims of the Audubon Society as organized in North Carolina. We are glad to learn of the formation of the local society in Charlotte. Our game birds need the protection of the law and our song-birds especially need to be preserved from extinction with which they are threatened. But because we are in sympathy with the ends of the society we would enter a caveat against making the law odious by a too rigid interpretation.

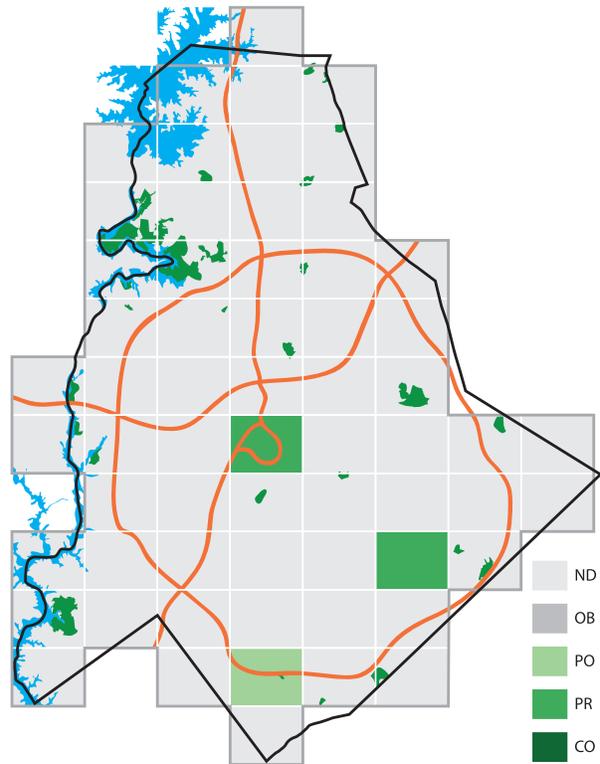
And the Audubon Society missed it in making it a crime to slay the festive bull-bat. No matter if he does eat mosquitoes and gnats. He is good to eat himself. There is nothing to him, it is true, but a succulent mouthful of breast, but that is a delicacy when properly cooked. It takes skill to shoot them as they swarm in the summer afternoons, and from time immemorial Southern sportsmen have taken delight in killing them for the sport and for their food-qualities as well.

It would be better, until the Legislature can right this mistake, to consider that the bull-bat is a bat, for purposes of description, or that the night-hawk is a hawk, for the same purposes. There is no use in making the law and the society odious at the start. There is plenty to be done to protect the song-birds

and the game-birds in their season, without going out of the way to punish folks who slay the voiceless unbeautiful, but sportful and toothsome bullbat, whose numbers seem no way diminished by the annual depredations of the sportsmen.

Today, over a century later, despite legal protections afforded by various state and federal laws, the once abundant Common Nighthawk remains in serious trouble. Scientists warn that the population of this species is in steep decline nationwide. In North Carolina, the nighthawk has been placed on the state Watch List as its breeding population in the state is in serious decline, and the species is considered vulnerable to extinction. Possible reasons include habitat destruction (on both winter and breeding grounds), increased pesticide usage, and increases in inland breeding of egg-eating Fish Crows.

Mecklenburg County BBA volunteers documented Common Nighthawk in a total of only three survey blocks. Two were designated as probable breeding sites and one as possible breeding. It is suspected that the nighthawk may still breed on the roof of some tall buildings in the urban center, but none were confirmed there. Many buildings no longer have gravel roofs and have little usable nesting space. One observer heard and saw at least one Common Nighthawk near Parkwood Avenue and North Davidson Street during safe dates. The bird was calling in flight on the evening of June 6, 2014.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Very Local (PR/2, CO/0)