

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture April 29th, 2009.

Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

White Pelicans winter locally in the Bay Area, in and around Alviso in the saltworks down there, in some of the pods at the Black Point cutoff in the north end of SF Bay, Bodega Harbor, Tomales Point, Limantour Estero, Coyote Hills. Breeds in the interior basins, places like Pyramid Lake, Nevada and Goose Lake in northern CA. They have had some nesting problems, there are declines, some of the nesting colonies have been abandoned, this results in birds migrating back to the Bay Area in summer, they may be seen in flocks in July and August when they really should be caring for their chicks.

Nightjars (aka Goatsuckers)

Medium to large cryptic nocturnal species. Many of them are best known for their vocalizations, many have names that are onomatopoeia for their vocalizations. In most cases you will hear them much more often than you ever have the chance to see them. Furthermore, if you do see them they are almost impossible to identify if they are perched. There are two significant exceptions to this general rule, and those are the two species of nighthawks.

Perch parallel to branches instead of across them as most other birds.

Tiny little feet not adapted for perching.

When you find them perched they look like an old rag lying on the ground rather than they look like a bird.

Long rictal bristles, small bill, gape opens up very wide.

Nighthawks

Both of these are medium large birds that forage at dusk. Some of them may forage during the middle of the day sweeping through the air on strongly angled wings with very buoyant flight and swallowing flying insects. They are generally more active in the evening and at night than they are during the daytime, but especially the Common Nighthawk is not terribly unusual to be found foraging during the daytime.

Both species are quite migratory, the Common Nighthawk more so than the Lesser.

There is nothing to the old "wisdom" that the nighthawks can be distinguished easily because the Lesser Nighthawks fly low over the ground and the Common Nighthawks fly high overhead. That is certainly not true. There might be a slight tendency in that direction. There is more to the actual elevation of the ground, meaning Common Nighthawks occur at higher elevations in areas of overlap.

FIELD MARKS

Pointed wing indicates that it is a Nighthawk and not some other kind of nightjar. Longer and more pointed on the nighthawks than on any of the other nightjars which have shorter, more rounded wings.

When you have one of these birds perched it is kind of a horror story to try to figure out what this bird is. One of the things to look for is contrast between the dark back and the pale wing coverts of the Common Nighthawk. That pattern is supposed to help separate the Lesser Nighthawk from the Common Nighthawk. On Lesser Nighthawk you do not see any particular contrast and the back itself is relatively pale.

The bill is very, very small and the mouth in fact is very, very wide. The gape extends back almost under the eye and the bird is capable of opening up the entire jaw and it goes after mostly moths, one of the main staples of nightjar diet, common nocturnal flying insects.

SEX DIFFERENCES

In general in nighthawks males and females are identical except for the tail pattern, in general the males have some kind of white pattern that the females usually lack on their tail. There may be some similar differences in the pattern of the wing. Also females usually have less white on the throat than males, general rule for nightjars, most of the males will have a white throat marking. In Sibley more easily seen on the birds in flight than on those on the ground, throat appears buffy on female.

ASSESSING THE WING PATTERN

Both species look rather alike with a white slash across the primaries. It almost looks like the birds have holes in their wings as they are flying overhead.

(The Common Pauraque has a similar wing pattern. It can be identified by its extremely long tail and by the fact that the wing tips are round.)

The position of the white patch on the outer wing distinguishes the two nighthawks. Lesser has it further out on the wing than Common. That is true but not easy to assess. In both species the white patch bends and angles back towards the middle of the wing at the trailing edge, so you look at the leading edge.

Concentrate on the leading edge of the outer part of the wing (from the bend of the wing to the tip). In Lesser Nighthawk the white patch is about two thirds out towards the wing tip from the bend. In Common Nighthawk it is about halfway out from the bend towards the tip at the leading edge. But be cautious, because of the wing tapering out towards the tip there is optical illusion, there is less area beyond the white patch towards the tip which makes it look like there is a shorter portion of the leading edge outwards to the tip than there is inwards to the bend from the white patch, even though the patch is in the middle of the leading edge. This can lead to misidentification of a Common Nighthawk as a Lesser Nighthawk.

On female Lesser Nighthawk the patch in the wing is buff (on Common Nighthawk white in both sexes).

Another character to look at is the wing formula, which is possible probably only on sharp photos and in the hand. It is a character frequently used to identify controversial specimens. Beware though of birds in molt and young birds with P10 not full grown yet!

On Lesser Nighthawk the outermost primary p10 is slightly shorter or equal to the next one (P9). The reverse is the case in the Common Nighthawk in which P10 is the longest primary.

Lesser Nighthawk

OCCURRENCE

Pretty much restricted to the far west.

Breeds in the southwestern part of the US.

Gets up to the northernmost point of its range in the Central Valley of CA where it breeds as far north as Red Bluff.

Largely a desert species. Quite abundant in the desert southwest, primarily away from the immediate coast.

Abundant at the Salton Sea during the summertime. If you get there very early in the morning before the sun comes out you'll find they are flying everywhere, they are the most common bird. In the evening they will also come out and be quite abundant.

Migration earlier than Common Nighthawk, with many Lesser Nighthawks already on territory by the middle of April.

There are numerous records from the month of April along the immediate coast including the Farallon Islands. Joe has seen them at least twice at Pt Reyes, both in the springtime. These appear to be migratory overshoots.

Used to come into the lights at Corral Hollow Rd in San Joaquin County. There is a nuclear weapons lab out there from the Lawrence Livermore Lab. The place is high fenced with barb wire at the top and there are lights shining around the building. If you wait around there sometimes you can see Lesser Nighthawks flying around the floodlights there

FIELD MARKS

White wing patch two thirds out on the outer wing. See general notes on nighthawks for further details.

On perched bird primary bar nearly straight across and beyond tips of tertials (see Sibley).

Shorter outermost primary gives slightly blunt wing tip, see general notes.

Male white band across the underside of the tail close to the end (inner webs of tail feathers, not visible on the folded tail from above).

Underparts buffy. (In general Common Nighthawk will look whitish on the underparts.)

VOCALIZATIONS

They are generally silent while foraging, they will call while perched. You will usually not see the bird vocalizing. They will sit on the ground or on a tree branch and give this rolling trill that sounds a little bit like some vocalizations of Screech Owl, but there are no Screech Owls in that habitat. Old vernacular name Trilling Nighthawk.

Common Nighthawk

OCCURRENCE

Abundant and widespread over all of the US and much of southern Canada. There is only one exception: it is not found in most of CA. Absent from southern CA, the Central Valley and coastal northern CA south of Mendocino County. In CA it is fairly common in the Great Basin, that is east of the Sierra Nevada, and it breeds there. Places like Honey Lake or Modoc National Wildlife Refuge, Mono Lake. Also occurs locally across extreme northern CA and along the coast as far south as Mendocino County.

The migration of the Common Nighthawk as far as CA is concerned is very much later than that of the Lesser Nighthawk. There are few if any Common Nighthawks on territory in the Great Basin until May, and not commonly until mid May. By mid to late May they arrive in Humboldt County, by the end of May they arrive in Mendocino County. So it appears that the migration route of the Common Nighthawk in CA is entirely east of the Sierra Nevada, and then a small population penetrates across the northern part of the state towards the coast and then south to Mendocino County. We simply do not see these birds migrating north into Mendocino County. They are fairly scarce in Mendocino County, they are right out at the very edge of their range. Fall migration reverse, also hook shaped.

There is no real habitat reason why we don't have Common Nighthawks in SF or around the Bay Area, they are supremely well adapted to human civilization and have done extremely well wherever we built buildings with gravel roof tops and put out spotlights. So why it is that they are missing from here is a little bit of an enigma. There are a few valid records from the Bay Area, one or two from the Farallon Islands. There are a number of sight records that have not been verified.

Abundant species, very commonly seen in towns and villages where it nests often on gravel roof tops. Also, when there are searchlights somewhere the moths come into those beams and the Common Nighthawks can frequently be found foraging around them. If you ever want to see Common Nighthawks just go to that big temple in Saltlake City, it has those lights all over the place, there's tons of nighthawks.

Common Nighthawks are much more likely to be seen at higher elevations. E.g. in Lassen County where Honey Lake is, that's 5-6,000 feet and those are all Common Nighthawks. On areas where the species overlap they occur at different elevations.

FIELD MARKS

White wing patch half way out on the outer wing. See general notes on nighthawks for further details.

On perched bird pale primary bar diagonal and hidden beneath tertials, see Sibley.

Bases of the primaries all black. (On most Lesser Nighthawks there will be buffy spots on the bases of the primaries.)

Underparts white with very crisp black barring. Much more contrasting and less blended than on most Lesser Nighthawks. (Lesser Nighthawks tend to be buffy and the dark bars are browner.)

Pale patch in lesser coverts and scapulars contrasts with blacker back, this zoned pattern of the upper parts is said to be a character of the Common Nighthawk.

VOCALIZATIONS

They frequently give away their presence by a very distinctive nasal call note coming from high up in the sky. There are not really any other birds that sound like a Common Nighthawk, but some of the calls made by the Common Goldeneye or the Bonaparte's Gull sound reasonably close. A calling nighthawk that you actually see and confirm that it's a nighthawk should be relatively easy to identify.

There is another sound made by the Common Nighthawk, that is a booming sound which is part of a dive display that the males give. It is almost like these dive displays that hummingbirds give. The bird gets up into the air and does a dive and does a swoop and

something or other makes this whooom sound at the bottom of the dive. Old vernacular name Booming Nighthawk.

Antillean Nighthawk

OCCURRENCE

Endemic to the Antilleans, replaces the Common Nighthawk there. Have been showing up in increasing numbers in the Florida Keys and rarely along the Florida mainland. Don't seem to arrive there until late spring.

FIELD MARKS

Looks almost identical to a Common Nighthawk, formerly considered to be a subspecies of it.

A little smaller and a little more buffy on the underparts, thus suggesting Lesser Nighthawk in some respects, which normally does not get anywhere near Florida though apart from very few vagrants.

VOCALIZATIONS

Unlike the other two nighthawks, a shrill kind of sharp notes.

Common Pauraque

OCCURRENCE

Mexican species, ranges well down into Middle America and the tropics where it is quite common in a variety of different habitats.

In the US in southern Texas. Easy to hear along the lower Rio Grande at night. The best places for them are the levees along the river, but you can no longer drive on them, there are gates and keys now because of immigration problems. Like a lot of the nightjars they frequently sit on quiet roads at dusk and at dawn and may forage from the roads themselves, they like open, flat areas. As you drive along you look for something that looks like a pile of dead leaves and then red eye shine in the middle of that. Joe once saw one that hopped like a toad, he thought first it was a Giant Toad, but it flew off. These birds can't walk, but apparently they jump sometimes. Not migratory.

FIELD MARKS

A large nightjar.
Extremely long, rounded tail, quite unique for a nightjar.
Wings also rounded.
White patches in the wings like a nighthawk.

VOCALIZATIONS

One or two purr-notes followed by a higher descending where, the bird is named for this.

Chuck-will's-widow

OCCURRENCE

Found in a variety of wooded areas in the southeastern part of the US.

Permanent resident in peninsular Florida.

Reasonably common in those areas.

Strictly nocturnal, not seen flying around the way nighthawks are.

Can be found during the daytime when you flush them off the ground or off branches.

They tend to be skittish, unlike Whip-poor-wills, which will frequently sit there and allow close approach. The Chuck-will's-widow will generally fly off like a big brown moth and disappear into the woods. They blend in very, very well with the leaf litter.

At least one record from CA.

FIELD MARKS

Rusty colored large nightjar. Pretty tricky to distinguish between it and the Whip-poor-will, which is smaller and has a blacker throat. Subtle differences in tail pattern.

Rounded wings.

Quite reddish with a lot of buffy spots.

Very difficult to distinguish from the Middle American Rufous Nightjar which has a different vocalization.

VOCALIZATIONS

If you hear the vocalizations from far away you don't usually hear the introductory chuck-note, just a couple of slurred whistles.

Whip-poor-will

OCCURRENCE

Much of the eastern US.

In Arizona and in the canyons of the southwest into the mountains of southern CA an isolated subspecies occurs.

Extremely locally distributed in the mountains of southern CA. In southern CA the species was first recorded at a place called Lake Fulmore in the San Jacinto Mountains. Also occur in the San Bernardino Mountains. Probably breed on Clark Mountain on the Nevada border.

Along the immediate coast Whip-poor-wills have occasionally been found. One was tape recorded at Big Sur. One was mist netted at Pt Loma in San Diego, based on measurements and subtle plumage differences it was thought to be of the eastern subspecies. One record was accepted by the committee from the Fish Docks at Pt Reyes. It was first assumed to be a Poorwill, but it was perched in a tree which Poorwills do not tend to do.

FIELD MARKS

Smaller and more compact than Chuck-will's-widow.

Black throat.

VOCALIZATIONS

Vocalization substantially different from Chuck-will's-widow. A fairly clear, loud whistle in the eastern populations. The similar vocalization of the western subspecies is much more rolling.

Buff-collared Nightjar

Has gone under a number of different names like Ridgways's Whip-poor-will or Cookachee, which is what it says.

Apparently related to the Whip-poor-will.

OCCURRENCE

Species of Mexico, barely gets into the US very locally in southeastern Arizona, southwestern New Mexico. You basically have to go on a special trip to go and see it or hire a guide.

There is a record of one found on a driveway in Ventura.

FIELD MARKS

Buffy collar around the back of the neck.

VOCALIZATIONS

Vocalization very similar to the dawn song of the Cassin's Kingbird.

Common Poorwill

OCCURRENCE

Found in the Great Basin region and in arid areas around the west, including much of CA. More common in the interior than along the coast.

Can be found at this time of year in Tilden Regional Park at Big Springs Fire Road. Unlike many other parks Tilden Park is open at night because the roads are through roads. There is a little quarry along that road and a herpetologist once found a hibernating Poorwill in that quarry.

Are supposed to be absent from northern CA in the wintertime but Joe has encountered one at Pt Reyes in January. There are a number of winter records, they do show up at CBCs.

When you night drive in the deserts in places like Big Pine you find amazing numbers. They sit down on the ground, go up for moths and then drop down again.

HIBERNATION

About the only bird that has ever been fully documented to hibernate. One of these birds was found in a crevice by the great desert ecologist Edmund C. Jaeger. The bird was torpid. He went back every two weeks and pulled the bird out of the crevice and measured its temperature, heart rate etc, documented an entire winter of the bird apparently hibernating until it was gone one day in the spring. They sometimes gather in numbers hibernating together in hollow Saguaro Cactuses. They get always found by herpetologists who stick sticks into crevices and turn over rocks rather than scan the sky and vegetation the way birdwatchers do.

FIELD MARKS

The smallest of the nightjars in NA

Short tailed, short winged bird without a lot of field marks.

Male has white corners to the tail