



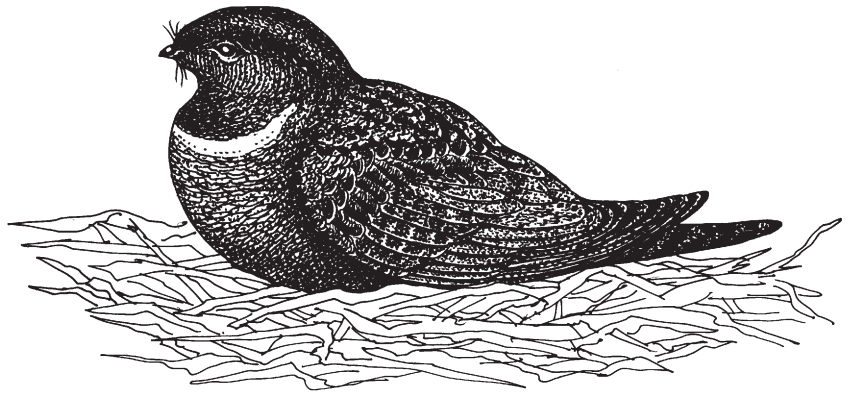
Whip-poor-will

Caprimulgus vociferus

Every country child is familiar with the wonderful nocturnal song of the whip-poor-will. These vocalizations carry a great distance, and sometimes one can hear different birds calling from various points on the compass. Common though the sound may be, its source is a thing of myth and mystery to almost everyone. So expert is this bird species in camouflage that it is very rarely seen by man. It belongs to an unusual group of birds, all quite similar in size and physical appearance, referred to as goat-suckers! This strange name arose from the myth that these birds actually sucked the milk of goats. Representatives of this group are found throughout temperate parts of the world. In North Carolina, one might also encounter the chuck-will's-widow and the common nighthawk, close relatives of the "whip." Ornithologists group the three together as nightjars, a European term for this interesting family.

History and Status

Early Europeans encountered our nightjars early on but failed to appreciate for a long time that the three were separate species. When Mark Catesby published his *Natural History of Carolina, Florida and the Bahama Islands, 1731-1743*, his descriptions were unclear regarding this matter. Finally, in 1771, Johann Reinhold Forster recognized that the most diurnal of the three, the common nighthawk, was clearly different from the other two.



Whips have increased in the Coastal Plain in the last few decades as "upland" pine plantations have replaced moist hardwood forests and pocosins. Whips are now widespread in pine plantations, although they are rather scarce in the mountains.

Description

The whip-poor-will, along with its kin, is striking in its appearance. It is 9 to 10 inches in length, with a large head and huge eyes adapted to night vision. The mouth opening extends far back on the sides of the head, allowing the bird to present a wide gape to the flying insects it pursues on the wing. Long, falconlike wings give it an advantage in flight, and inch-long bristles outlining its huge mouth probably serve to increase the efficiency of its aerial forays. The velvet softness of the plumage permits silent flight. The final touch in its eccentric design is its tiny feet. When perched aloft, the bird aligns itself parallel to the long axis of the branch.

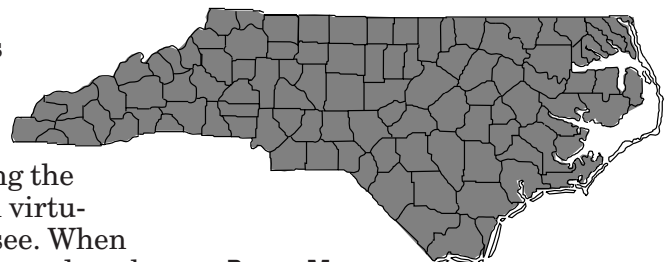
The plumage is an elaborately mottled combination of dark grays and browns, making the perched individual virtually impossible to see. When flushed from the ground, males show large, white tail patches;

these patches are buff colored in the female.

Habitat and Habits

The whip spends most of its life in an environment of deciduous, second-growth oaks, beeches and hickory trees. It roosts by day, becoming active as sunlight diminishes late in the day. At dusk, birds fly out of the woods and perch on dirt roads or in woodland openings, from where they dart out after flying insects. While flying over open ground, it prefers to stay low, in contrast to the nighthawk, which feeds at higher-altitude flights. With a combination of eyes adapted for low light levels and a body shape designed for speed and maneuverability, this bird successfully meets the challenge of preying on a large cross section of crepuscular and nocturnal insect species.

When day length increases by late March, the North Carolina population of this species



Range Map:
Occupied range 

swells from a few overwintering individuals in the east to a nearly statewide distribution during the breeding season. The Piedmont counties appear to be favored during the breeding season. Soon, the familiar call that gives this bird its name is heard from the woods it frequents.

The whip-poor-will lays two eggs on the forest floor, with a preference for deciduous leaf litter. The bird makes no attempt to construct a nest, but the eggs are so well camouflaged that they are hard to find. The birds seem to select nest sites where dappled sunlight penetrates the canopy, making detection of the incubating bird more difficult. The female is thought to incubate the eggs alone.

The eggs hatch in 19 or more days. The young hatchlings require intensive parental care for successful rearing. The female appears to have most of the burden of rearing the young, with the male rarely involved. She is the one that expertly mimics injury when an intruder approaches too closely. Progressing from cinnamon-colored down to darker juvenile plumage, the young are soon mobile. Their strategy when discovered, however, is to remain immobile, relying on their very inconspicuous colors to avoid detection.

This species is single brooded. During August, the young of the year develop the skills necessary for independence. By the time the dog days have passed, the whip-poor-wills have moved farther south, and the high-spirited calls of this bird are once again absent from most of our state. This bird spends the remainder of the annual cycle from the Gulf States into Central America.

Range and Distribution

The whip-poor-will breeds from central and eastern Canada south to northern Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia.

The preponderance of breeding birds in North Carolina are found in the Piedmont and northern Coastal Plain regions.

People Interactions

This songbird has never been considered a game bird species in North Carolina.

References

Forbush, Edward Howe, and John Richard May. *Natural History of the Birds of Eastern and Central North America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1939).

Pearson, T. Gilbert, C.S. Brimley and H.H. Brimley. *Birds of North Carolina* (Raleigh: N.C. Department of Agriculture, 1942).

Potter, Eloise, James F. Parnell and Robert Teulings. *Birds of the Carolinas* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

Credits

Written by Wayne Irvin.

Illustrated by J.T. Newman.

Produced January 1997 by the Division of Conservation Education, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

The Wildlife Resources Commission is an Equal Opportunity Employer, and all wildlife programs are administered for the benefit of all North Carolina citizens without prejudice toward age, sex, race, religion or national origin. Violations of this pledge may be reported to the Equal Employment Officer, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, 512 N. Salisbury St., Raleigh, N.C. 27604-1188. (919) 733-2241.

WHIP-POOR-WILL

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Caprimulgiformes

Average Size

Length: 9 in.

Wingspan: 16 to 19 in.

Food

Mainly flying insects

Breeding

Whip-poor-wills are monogamous. Courtship begins soon after the migrants have returned from the south. The normal clutch size is two eggs, laid on the bare forest floor. The female does all the incubating and rears the young.

Young

Newly hatched whip-poor-wills are completely helpless, relying completely on parental care and their cryptic coloration for survival. With rapid growth, they are soon independent.