

Distinguishing Illinois Nightjars

by Robert Hughes

In the twilight hours in a wooded area, the repetitive song begins. Whip-poor-will... Whip-poor-will... The bird is easily identified. The same goes for the Chuck-will's-widow, whose four-syllable song contrasts the three-syllable song of the Whip-poor-will. The other nightjar seen in Illinois, the Common Nighthawk, makes a striking nasal "peent," unlike any call of the other two.

One can safely identify nightjars by voice. But separating these cryptically-colored birds by sight during the day is more challenging.

This article discusses the visual characteristics that can be used to separate the Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*), which has long, pointed wings from Chuck-will's Widow (*Caprimulgus carolinensis*), and Whip-poor-will (*Caprimulgus vociferus*), the two round-winged nightjars occurring in Illinois.

A summer resident throughout Illinois, the Common Nighthawk arrives in late spring and departs in August. Stragglers occur in October. Chuck-will's-widow is restricted as a breeder to southern and sometimes central Illinois, although it does occur occasionally, mostly as a spring overshoot, in the northern part of the state. Its close cousin, the Whip-poor-will is more widespread, breeding in appropriate habitat such as coniferous and mixed woodlands throughout Illinois.

Nighthawks

As a group, the nighthawks can be recognized immediately by the presence of a white transverse bar on the outer part of each wing, most con-

spicuous in flight and not present in either of the round-winged nightjars. However, this bar can be hidden on a resting bird by the overlapping tertials or by leaves.

Also, the male Common Nighthawk has a white throat, a feature not shared with the round-winged nightjars. Females and immatures have buffy throats. Fortunately, more reliable field marks than these can be used to separate these two groups.

Facial Bristles

Nightjars possess modified feathers known as rictal bristles that run along the side of the face from the corners of the mouth. In the round-winged species, these bristles are thick and long, giving these birds a whiskered appearance that is obvious at close range. In the Common Nighthawk, at all ages and in all plumages, these bristles are small and obscure so that the facial region appears clean-shaven.

Primary Pattern and Color

The color and pattern of the prima-

ries offer excellent clues in separating these two groups. The primaries of the Common Nighthawk are, except for the white wing bar, solid, blackish-brown. Both the unmarked pattern and the color contrast strongly with the mottled, brownish gray body. On the round-winged nightjars, the primaries are barred with dark brown and rust, and thus more closely resemble the mottled brownish body.

Wing Length

Differences in wing length are obvious on resting individuals. The Common Nighthawk has longer wings which just reach the end of the tail, sometimes nearly concealing it. The round-winged nightjars, on the other hand, have shorter wings which fall noticeably short of the end of the tail, leaving the outer part of the tail exposed.

Crown Streaking

The crown in both round-winged nightjars has prominent longitudinal black streaks. Common Nighthawks have a dark crown with sparse buffy



Whip-poor-will by Eric Walters