

AN OBSERVATION OF GROUND FEEDING AND COPROPHAGY BY A COMMON NIGHTHAWK IN NW MANITOBA

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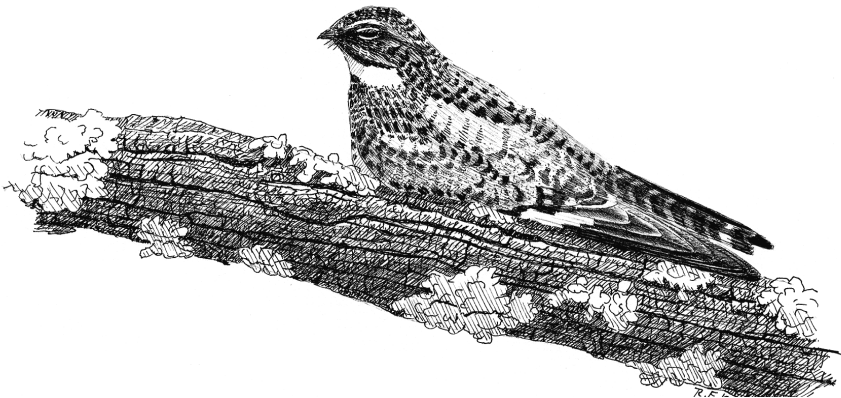
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The common nighthawk, *Chordeiles minor*, reaches its northernmost summer range near the northern boundaries of the Canadian Prairie Provinces. Although the IUCN lists its status as “of least concern”, its decline in recent years has been alarming, leading to it being classified as “threatened” by COSEWIC in 2007.

Our observations took place on 9 July 2013 at about 1900 hr at the Bain Lake fishing outpost (58° 54' 48"N; 99° 13' 55"W.) of Gangler's North Seal River Lodges, in northwest Manitoba. The outpost consists of a number

of small buildings in a partially-cleared area with scattered white, black spruce and white birch. The weather was overcast, the air smoky from nearby forest fires and the temperature about 12° C. Our observations were made using 7 x 42 and 10 x 42 binoculars.

The first observation of the common nighthawk was as it flew past one of us (RFK) just outside the cabin at less than 2 m distance. This was a startling experience because of the bird's close proximity and the rapidity of its flight.



Line drawing of common nighthawk
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- Rudolf Koes
Blue Jay

Then, when both observers were inside the cabin, a bird (presumably the same individual) flew through the same clearing in a very fast manner, passing our window less than 10 m away at a height of about 4 m above the ground. This happened more than once. We observed that these “fly-pasts” by the bird were part of wide circles of about 80 m diameter. On the last observed “lap” the bird landed on the sandy ground in the clearing directly in front of our observation window.

It spent a few minutes on the ground observing its surroundings, then picked up and ate some ants. It then shuffled around and ate more ants. It appeared to be searching in a determined manner. It then picked up and ate about 7 or 8 white objects from the ground. Total observation time on the ground was about ten minutes; the bird eventually flew away and was not seen again.

After observing these events we went outside to identify the remaining white objects. We discovered that they were old, bleached feces of a carnivore. Ken Poitras, the camp manager, told us that the scats were those of a gray wolf and had been present since the previous year (2012). There are no domestic dogs in the area.

Common nighthawks are virtually never seen feeding on the ground because like other members of the nightjar family, they are aerial feeders. We speculate that this bird was eating the remains of carnivore feces to supplement its diet with calcium carbonate. Barclay has shown that bats and those birds that are primarily aerial insectivores may have life history consequences due to the limited amounts of calcium in their diets. Female birds deplete their own calcium stores to meet the demand of growing offspring; in this case the bird found a ready source of calcium.¹ Secondly, it is important to reiterate that this was not a random event because the bird appeared to be purposefully searching for both ants and feces. Its repeated flight circuits over the clearing were possibly to examine the items and to check the safety/feasibility of landing to eat them.



Common nighthawk on post

- Anne Brigham

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References

1. Barclay, R.M.R. 1994. Constraints on reproduction by flying vertebrates: Energy and calcium. *The American Naturalist*: 144(6): 1021-1031.



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