

Whip-poor-will- Shadow Songbird

Whip-poor-will. The word evokes something mysterious and enchanted, for me. For as far back as I can remember, the call of the whip-poor-will had accompanied me to sleep during spring and summer nights. Familiar and unknown. After all, who gets to see one of these creatures of the night?

Somewhere the sounds of the whip-poor-will began to stop. Where and when exactly, I can't remember. Maybe they were always there and I had just stopped listening. Maybe I was so caught up in stresses and dramas of my life, that I didn't see and hear the nature all around. Maybe, they really were not there.

Whatever it was, sadly, I had not taken time to figure it out. Oh, sometimes I would think to myself, "I wonder why I haven't heard a whip-poor-will in a while?" I'd wonder...and then go on.

When the dramas of my life lessened, I'd wonder more frequently. My wondering turned to yearning and mourning. I yearned to hear that song the way I once did. I mourned for the time when I could take for granted that when I opened my window, the sound of beauty and mystery would greet me.

Out of the night, all at once it came. That lovely call "whip pr will, whip pr will". I listened, my heart pounding, for several minutes. I ran toward it, then stopped, not wanting to spook it. It was probably about a quarter-mile away. Not far, yet it could easily go unnoticed amid the racket at my house.

On and on it called. I wanted to go closer and spend the night listening to that whip-poor-will, but responsibility beckoned. This was at the end of April of 2005, and the joy that the whip-poor-will's song brought is still with me. I continued to hear it periodically through the summer and always look forward to the return. I heard 3 of them in April of the following year. Now, in 2011, it has been several years since I've heard a whip. I do hear chuck-will's-widows every summer.

Hear the lonesome whip-poor-will.

He sounds too blue to fly.

The midnight train is whining low.

I'm so lonesome I could cry.

-Hank Williams

The song of the whip-poor-will is maybe the most recognizable of all nocturnal birds in our area, but it is probably often confused with the very similar chuck-wills-widow. In my area, the chuck-wills-widow is far more common. I have even heard people refer to it as a whip-poor-will.

Males probably do most of the singing and it is more likely to be heard during moonlit nights and at daybreak and nightfall. Whip-poor-wills generally don't sing on nights with medium to heavy rainfall.

Male whip-poor-wills who did not breed will sing during the entire season. Mated whip-poor-wills are

hand, there are those who would ridicule my romanitized ruminations, though I find it neither sad nor joyful, just simply enchanting.

From an 1899 publication, *Birds and All Nature*, a writer both lauds and criticizes the call of the bird. In the distance, the author says the call is 'delightful'. Up close, that same call can be "an almost painful, penetrating shrillness."

The author recounts how several whip-poor-wills would congregate on the doorsteps of his childhood home in Iowa. The birds would proceed to sing, even as the boy and his family sat on the other side of the door. The author claims that though one could not sneak upon a whip-poor-will in the woods, that if he stood in his yard in the dark, the birds would fly close enough to brush him with their wings.

ALL THAT LORE

There is no lack of lore surround-



ing the whip-poor-will. Early American settlers thought the song was of the devil. Another myth inspired the name of "goat-

sucker" for members of the nightjar family which includes the whip-poor-will. (In fact, the scientific family name for nightjars, Caprimulgus, means "a milker of goats.")

MOURNFUL...JOYFUL...OR NOT.

This myth seems to have originated with the European nightjar, which people thought suckled milk from goats and other farm animals. As is often the case, this myth was based on half truth. Birds in the nightjar family may be found flying near herd animals. Herd animals do of course attract and stir up

thought to sing less after a successful hatch. During the migration, Whip-poor-wills are heard on occasion.

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insects which the Whip-poor-will eats. Some sources point the historical finger even further back in time to Aristotle.

Faster than...a speeding bat. That's what Phillip H. Gosse, in Letters From Alabama (1838), writes of standing on the top deck of a steamer on the Alabama River at dawn. Watching whip-poor-wills frenetically darting about above the water, Gosse was impressed with the speed with which they caught insects- faster than bats. He also said they outlasted the bats, gradually retiring after the bats had already gone.

LUNAR LINK

The moon is a central backdrop in the lives of whip-poor-wills. On a moonlit night, the whip-poor-will will probably call throughout provided rain isn't too heavy. The mating cycle of the birds often coincides with the moon's phase.

The young apparently come into this world as the moon waxes. And they fledge when the moon is high, which means insects will be easier to find. Perhaps more study on the subject of whip-poor-wills and lunar phases will be conducted in the future. It is a fascinating subject.

ELUSIVE

Little has been written on the subject of nightjars because the birds are immensely difficult to study. In the 1990's, at least two new species of nightjars were described, with unidentified birds continuing to be documented.

Naturalist and photographer William Burt, who has photographed and written a book about some of the world's most rare and elusive birds, found them to be a challenge. For his book Rare and Elusive Birds, he thought that photographing nightjars would be simple enough given that he had photographed some rare birds. In order to photograph five species of this family- including the whip-poor-will- it took five years.

After unsuccessfully trying to get close to whip-poor-wills, he learned of biology professor Calvin Cink of Baker University in Baldwin City, Kansas. He had spent seventeen seasons studying whip-poor-wills and is presumed to be the authority on the subject.

Alone, Burt had no trouble finding whip-poor-wills calling, but once he got within a certain range, they would flee. With Cink's method of locating whip-poor-will nests, Burt was able to finally photograph the birds. Since whip-poor-wills are not rare and nest on the ground, one wouldn't expect

that they would be so difficult to locate.

As William Burt was to discover, one could look directly at a whip-poor-will on its nest of leaf litter and still never see it. Incidentally, a nesting sighting occurred in the Walls of Jericho in May 2005.

BEHAVIOR, HABITAT AND SUCH

Whip-poor-wills prefer pine and/or oak forests with little undergrowth. Nests sites may be situated in openings in the forest or along the edge of trees. Often they are found beside a tree stump or underneath a bush.

Whip-poor-wills may forage for food or catch insects while flying. Their diet includes moths, beetles, grasshoppers, crickets, mosquitoes, caddisflies, locusts, ants and maybe worms. The amount of time a whip-poor-will spends feeding is dependent upon the moonlight. If there is little or no light there may be no time spent. On a moonlit night, the whip-poor-will may spend the entire night feeding. With sufficient light, feeding begins 30 minutes after sunset. Morning feeding begins "near first light and ends about 40 minutes before sunrise (Birds of North America Online)."

If an intruder happens upon a nest, the whip-poor-will may react in one of several ways, depending on the circumstances. If the bird is not incubating or does not have young, it will probably fly away. The female may fly to a perch and give a "chuck," "couk," or "quirt, quirt." Often, whip-poor-wills will hover over an intruder. If there are chicks, when an intruder approaches the chicks will hop away from the nest while the mother distracts, sometimes feigning an injury.

Whip-poor-wills appear to be monogamous and breed from May through July. The female lays two well-camouflaged eggs on leaf litter. The male is an active presence in the incubation process, staying on the eggs at night- though he apparently takes frequent breaks. Both the male and female stay close to the nesting area when not on the eggs. Incubation is thought to take from 19-21

Whip-poor-will vs Chuck-will's Widow: Differences

SONG

The Whip-poor-will sounds like he is singing "whip-poor-will", with a distinct "will" at the end; the Chuck-will's-widow sounds like a somewhat abbreviated version of a whip-poor-will.

SIZE

The Whip-poor-will is about 2.4 inches shorter than the Chuck-wills-widow.

SECRETIVE

The Chuck-will's-widow, in my experience, does not spook so easily, continuing his song even as vehicles rumble down the road yards away from his singing perch. The Whip-poor-will will cease singing and seems to vanish when approached.

days. About 10 days before a full moon, the eggs hatch. Frequently the mother will begin a second clutch once the first have molted at around 8 days old. The second clutch is laid in a new nest site, though not far from the first.

Though well camouflaged, whip-poor-wills do have enemies. Predators include coyotes, foxes, raccoons and dogs and cats. Vehicles also cause some deaths amongst whip-poor-wills, which have been observed to sit or dust bathe in the road.

RANGE AND MIGRATION

According to nightjars, as of 1998, there were six recognized races of whip-poor-will. *Caprimulgus vociferus vociferus*, the whip-poor-will found in our area during breeding season, occurs sc and se Canada, south to Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Louisiana, NE Texas, North Carolina; west to Oklahoma; and up the eastern part of the state to Maine. There is one other whip-poor-will, which inhabits the US. It is the *c.v.arizonae*, which lives in the South-west.

Much of the northern US has experienced a decline in the number of whip-poor-wills. According to David Sibley, whip-poor-wills "fluctuate

dramatically in response to the cutting and regeneration of the forest."

The wintering range of *c.v.vociferus* is "S Carolina and the gulf states, south through E Mexico to Guatemala, S Belize, El Salvador and Honduras. It may winter in S California, Cuba, Costa Rica and W Panama. Also occasionally winters along the east coast of the USA, as far north as New Jersey."

Whip-poor-wills begin arriving in North Alabama in late March or early April. The earliest record for a sighting is March 22nd. The fall migration begins around the end of August with a late recorded song date of September 3rd. Little information exists regarding migratory habits. Whip-poor-wills do migrate during the night time hours. Some evidence has been found of small flocks, but most evidence suggests lone migration.

The next time you hear a whip-poor-will, remember that for all its familiarity, you are hearing a creature with secrets waiting to be discovered. Or maybe those secrets will remain unknown. If we knew everything, would the whip-poor-will's call hold the same mystical allure?

ADDITIONAL INFO

All About Birds; www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Whip-poor-will.html. Free searchable database

Nightjars: A Guide to Nightjars and Related Nightbirds, Nigel Cleere and Dave Nurney, 1998 Pica Press

Whip-poor-will in the Arts

Anthology of Alabama Poetry: Whatever Remembers Us, several poems mention the bird.

<http://www.suebwalker.com/alabamaanthology.html>

"Cry of the Whippoorwill" from album *The Storm Still Rages*, bluegrass artist Rhonda Vincent

The Waltz of the Whippoorwill from album of same name, Indie award nominated Joe Weed, songs are based on birdsong melodies.

Frost, Dickinson, Longfellow, Cummings and Sandburg are just a few writers contemplating the bird.

-Anita Smith
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Photo by J. A. Spindelov