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Birds of the Great Plains (Revised edition 2009) by  
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## Birds of the Great Plains: Family Caprimulgidae (Goatsuckers)

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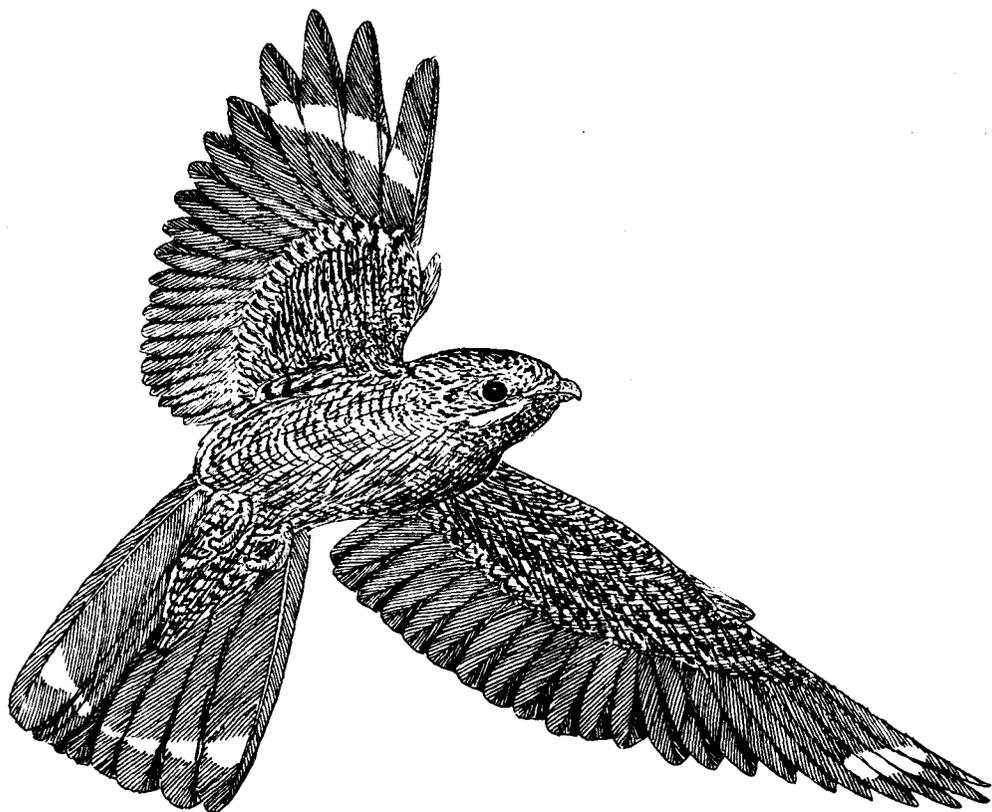
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FAMILY CAPRIMULGIDAE  
(GOATSUCKERS)



Common Nighthawk

Chuck-will's-widow  
*Caprimulgus carolinensis*

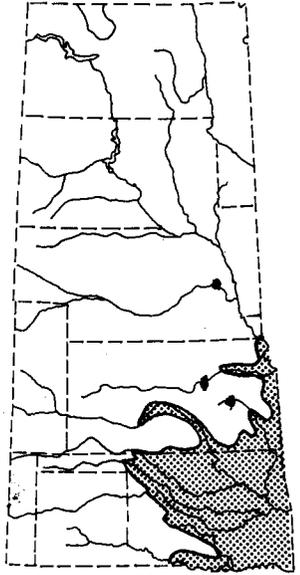
**Breeding Status:** Breeding is limited to the southern half of the region, including the wooded portions of eastern Oklahoma and eastern Kansas (south of Wyandotte County and east of Shawnee, Greenwood, Stafford, and Sedgwick counties). The northern limit of probable breeding is northwestern Missouri, where summering birds occasionally occur at Squaw Creek National Wildlife Refuge. Birds have repeatedly been heard calling in extreme southeastern Nebraska, but nesting has not yet been proved (*Nebraska Bird Review* 35:50).

**Breeding Habitat:** Mixed oak and pine forests are the favored habitat, and evergreen oak groves are also important.

**Nest Location:** The eggs are usually laid at the edges of forests, near roads or other clearings, and are placed on the ground amid dead leaves, with no actual nest constructed. Usually there is little or no undergrowth about the eggs.

**Clutch Size and Incubation Period:** There are 2 eggs, creamy white with blotching of brown, lavender, and gray tones. The incubation period is 20 days, starting with the first egg, and the eggs hatch a day apart. Single-brooded, but a persistent renester.

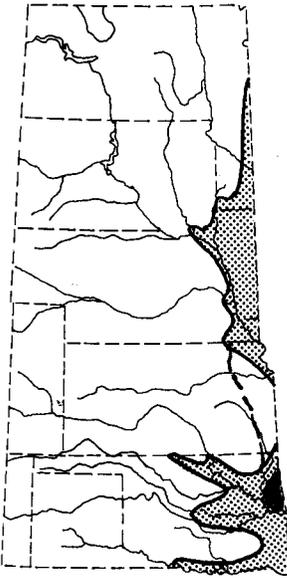
**Time of Breeding:** Kansas egg records are from April 21 to May 31, with a possible peak in the third week of May. Oklahoma egg dates extend from May 4 to June 23, and unfledged or recently fledged young have been seen from May 31 to July 1.



**Breeding Biology:** Shortly after the birds arrive on their nesting grounds, males begin their distinctive nocturnal calling, the notes sounding like the species' vernacular name. Calling is strongest at this time but continues until after the eggs are hatched, and at the peak of calling it may also occur during daylight hours. When displaying to a female, the male sidles up to her with wings drooping and tail spread, while calling and maximally "inflating" himself. An aerial display involving wing-clapping several times in rapid succession is also known and probably serves in territorial defense or maintenance. The typical "song" is believed to function both in territoriality and in courtship, and several other calls are known to occur in this species as well. The two eggs are laid about 24 hours apart, and both sexes incubate. The folklore about these birds picking up their eggs or young in their beaks and moving them some distance after the clutch has been disturbed is probably untrue, but the birds are known to roll the eggs limited distances. The young hatch in a downy and relatively precocial state and crawl about actively shortly after hatching. They are apparently cared for only by the female, and they can fly fairly well by the 16th or 17th day of life.

**Suggested Reading:** Mengel and Jenkinson 1971; Ganier 1964.

Whip-poor-will  
*Caprimulgus vociferous*



**Breeding Status:** Breeds in wooded areas along the eastern edge of the region, including central and southern Minnesota, southeastern South Dakota, eastern Nebraska in the Missouri River Valley (and Pawnee County) and presumably also adjacent Iowa, northwestern Missouri, northeastern Kansas (breeding records for Doniphan, Leavenworth, and Douglas counties), and probably the eastern third of Oklahoma, although specific records are still lacking for that state. There is a single breeding record for the Texas side of the Red River Valley, in Grayson County.

**Breeding Habitat:** Open hardwood or mixed woodlands, particularly younger stands in fairly dry habitats, seem to be the preferred habitat of this species. Stands with scattered clearings also seem to be favored.

**Nest Location:** The eggs are deposited on a carpet of dead leaves on the ground, usually in an area of dappled shade where there is no undergrowth. Sometimes the eggs are under a small bush, but they are placed in its shadow rather than close to its stems.

**Clutch Size and Incubation Period:** There are 2 eggs, creamy to grayish with darker spotting. The eggs are laid on successive days, and incubation lasts 19 days, starting with the second egg. Single-brooded.

**Time of Breeding:** Two Kansas records of eggs range from May 21 to June 20. Texas egg records are from mid-April to at least mid-June.

**Breeding Biology:** Evidently these birds begin to sing their distinctive songs immediately after arriving on their nesting areas, since the widespread initiation of their vocalizations occurs suddenly. The courtship displays have been witnessed only a few times, but the male seems to “waddle” or “dance” about the female while producing a variety of strange sounds as well as sidling up to the female and touching bills with her. An aerial display involving tail-spreading is also present. When incubation begins the male continues to sing and gradually moves closer to the nest. In one nest studied in Iowa, the female incubated during the daytime and the male incubated at night. Males have been seen at the nest on only a few occasions, and it is still uncertain as to whether they regularly help feed the young. When hatched, the young are covered with a thin down that is soon replaced with juvenile feathers. They begin to leave the area of the nest when 4-5 days old and can fly by the time they are 3 weeks of age.

**Suggested Reading:** Raynor 1941; Kent and Vane 1958.

## Poor-will

### *Phalaenoptilus nuttallii*

**Breeding Status:** Breeds in arid habitats from extreme southwestern North Dakota southward through western South Dakota, western Nebraska (rarely east to Lancaster County), western Kansas (rarely east to Leavenworth County), and western Oklahoma and the Texas panhandle, as well as adjacent New Mexico and Colorado.

**Breeding Habitat:** This species prefers rocky habitats with scrubby cover or xeric woodlands, but it also extends into prairie grasslands in some areas.

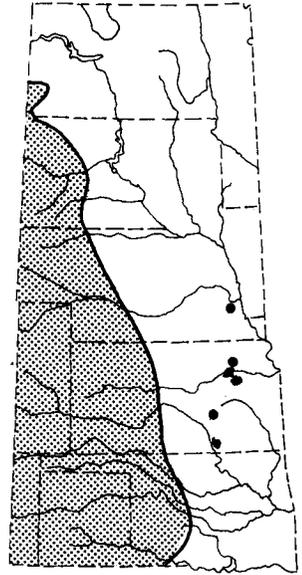
**Nest Location:** The eggs are placed on the ground, often in bare areas under dwarf scrub oaks, where dead leaves provide concealment for both adults and young.

**Clutch Size and Incubation Period:** There are 2 eggs, white to pinkish or creamy. The incubation period is about 18 days. Single-brooded.

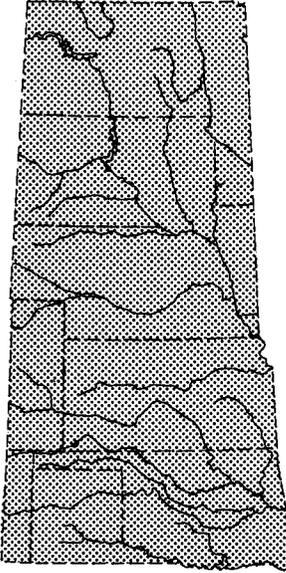
**Time of Breeding:** Records of eggs in Colorado extend from May 20 to June 14, and dependent young have been recorded from June 6 to July 9. Kansas egg records are from May 1 to June 20, and those from Texas are from March 21 to July 26.

**Breeding Biology:** Like other species in this family, poor-wills are late spring migrants, and soon after arrival they begin to utter their distinctive *poor-will* or *poor-will-low* notes during the evening. Virtually nothing is known of their courtship displays, which are presumably similar to those of the whip-poor-will. Nests are extremely difficult to locate, and the adult usually remains motionless on the nest until very closely approached. Although females perhaps do most of the incubating, males have been seen incubating at night and also have been observed brooding the young. When incubating or brooding, both adults and young keep their eyes almost completely shut, which adds to the effective camouflage of these inconspicuous birds. When disturbed the adults often utter a loud hissing sound and maximally inflate themselves, which has a frightening effect on those unfamiliar with the birds. The young are hatched in a downy coat, soon replaced with a juvenile plumage similar to that of adults. The fledging period has not been well established, but is less than a month. Most poor-wills migrate south by early fall, but in a few locations such as in California individuals have been found torpid among rocks or vegetation during subfreezing temperatures. This is the first known example of semihibernation among birds, although some other birds such as hummingbirds also enter a torpid state when exposed to cold overnight temperatures.

**Suggested Reading:** Bent 1940; Bailey and Niedrach 1965.



## Common Nighthawk *Chordeiles minor*



**Breeding Status:** Breeds throughout the entire region and varies from abundant to common in most regions, especially around cities.

**Breeding Habitat:** Open habitats such as grasslands, sparse woods, or cities are probably preferred by this aerial forager, but it seems highly adaptable to utilizing varied habitats.

**Nest Location:** No nest is built; the eggs are placed on flat substrates such as gravelly ground, burned-over areas, and gravel and asphalt rooftops.

**Clutch Size and Incubation Period:** There are 2 eggs, gray with darker spotting over most of the egg. The incubation period is 19 days, beginning with the second egg. Single-brooded.

**Time of Breeding:** North Dakota egg dates extend from June 11 to July 23, and nestings have been seen from June 29 to August 7. Kansas egg dates are from May 11 to June 30, and those from Oklahoma are from May 24 to June 22.

**Breeding Biology:** Nighthawks are fairly late arrivals on northern nesting areas and the males soon announce their presence by aerial displays. The most conspicuous of these is the *peent* call, uttered during a series of 4-5 wingbeats and serving to announce territorial ownership. Males also perform steep dives with down-flexed wings, each dive ending with a rush of air that produces a booming noise. Such dives are often almost directly over the nest site. Several other vocalizations are produced by males or by males and females. The females deposit their two eggs on almost any flat surface and often move them about in the course of incubation, sometimes as far as 5-6 feet from their original position. The eggs are rolled in front of the bird as the female settles on them for incubation. Some investigators report that only the female incubates, while others state that one sex incubates at night and the other by day, which seems most likely given the foraging behavior of the species. In any case, both sexes are known to help care for the young. As the adults bring food to their offspring they apparently place their bills inside the gaping mouths of the chicks and regurgitate food with a strong pumping of the head. Feeding is usually done at dusk, after sunset, and just before dawn, but not at night. About 3 weeks are required for the fledging of the young, and they are independent at about 30 days.

**Suggested Reading:** Sutherland 1963; Weller 1958.

