

Common Nighthawk (CONI)

Chordeiles minor

Description

Common Nighthawks are medium-sized (~23 cm long), slender nightjars with long, pointed wings; when gliding, their wings are angled in a wide V-shape. They have a large, flat head, big eyes, a small bill with bristly whiskers, and an enormous mouth. They are well camouflaged with mottled gray, white, buff, and black plumage over most of the body. Their underparts are buff (light brownish yellow) with pronounced dark brown barring on their abdomen and sides. They have a distinctive white bar across their wings that can be seen in flight (see in photo on next page). Males and females are relatively similar in appearance. Males have a white tail band and throat patch while females have overall browner plumage, a light brown throat patch, and lack a tail band. Juveniles have similar plumage, but they are paler, have a less distinct throat patch, no tail band, and narrower barring.

Known and potential breeding habitat

Common Nighthawks nest on the bare ground in open habitats. While they breed in the southern part of Labrador, they are uncommon in Newfoundland, although infrequent observations have been reported to eBird. No evidence of breeding has yet been reported on the island, but the breeding season is expected to extend from June to August.

Detection Tips

Habitat

Common Nighthawks nest on bare ground, such as sand dunes, forest openings, burned areas, rocky/sandy habitats, grasslands, and barrens. Although less common, they can also inhabit mixed and coniferous forests as well as urban environments, where they may breed on gravel-covered rooftops. For a suitable nesting site, they require dry substrate and some shade coverage to prevent eggs from overheating. When foraging, Common Nighthawks opportunistically aggregate in habitats where there are concentrations of flying insects, such as waterways, wetlands, or some terrestrial habitats.

Vocalization

Both sexes make a short, nasal call, often described as “peent”. This call is heard most often at dawn and dusk. During the breeding season, males make a “booming” sound with their wings when diving during aerial mating displays. Females are quieter than males, except during



Photo By: Jared Clarke



Open/Meadow



COSEWIC Ranking:
Special Concern



NL Designation:
Threatened



Nightjars

Photo By: Kathy Marche





Adult male Common Nighthawk
Photo By: Daniel Arndt

nest defense, when they hiss or cluck.

Behaviour

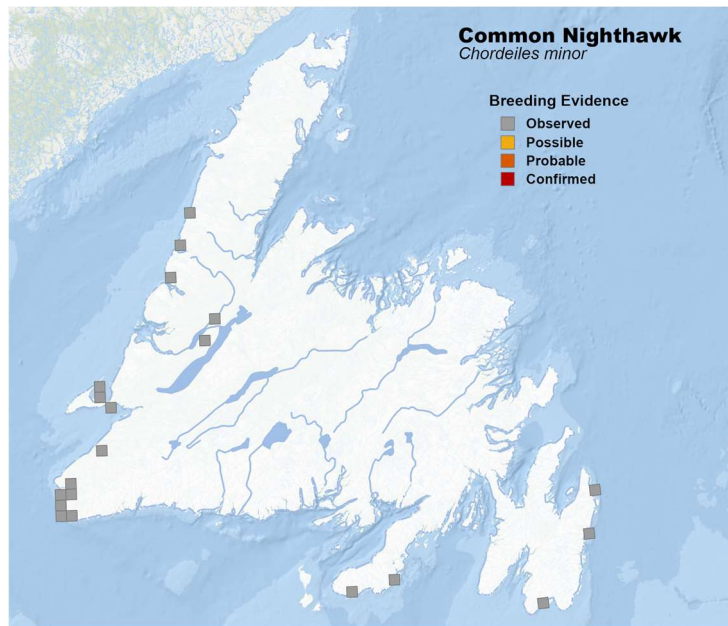
Despite their name, Common Nighthawks are crepuscular, which means they actively forage during the low light conditions of dusk and dawn. They fly with graceful, continuous flaps, and periodically glide. They forage by flying in large circles until they encounter insects; then they use their wide gaping mouth to snap at prey. They can often make erratic flight maneuvers to catch insects. During the day, they roost on the ground or perched lengthwise on a branch. They typically forage individually, though they have been observed foraging in flocks.

Nesting

Common Nighthawks do not build a nest; rather, they lay eggs on bare ground in open areas with dry substrate: gravel, sand, bare rock, forest duff, leaves, needles, and occasionally vegetation. They have only one brood per season. Females lay 2 heavily speckled creamy white or grey eggs. Incubation is almost always done by the female and the eggs are left unattended when the female feeds in the evening. Both males and females will defend the nest; females may feign injury when flushed (forced out of hiding) from eggs or young. Males feed the young by regurgitating insects during dusk and dawn.

Breeding Evidence

While no breeding evidence has been discovered on Newfoundland, expected evidence includes individuals observed in suitable nesting habitat (H), males singing in suitable nest site (S), pair observed in suitable nesting habitat (P), courtship display (D), agitated behaviour or anxiety calls of an adult (A), injury feigning (DD), recently fledged young (FY), adults entering/leaving nest site (AE), and a nest containing eggs (NE) or young (NY).



Common Nighthawks (*Chordeiles minor*) were detected in 20 squares in Newfoundland during the past ten years (2011–2021). Breeding has not been confirmed on the island.