

Common Nighthawk

Chordeiles minor

The Common Nighthawk is by far the most well-known and conspicuous member of the goatsucker family (Caprimulgidae) to occur in Vermont. Folklore erroneously maintained that birds in this family sucked milk from goats with their enormous mouths. Common Nighthawks are frequently seen hawking for flying insects over towns and open countryside in the evening.

A ground nester, the Common Nighthawk benefited in several ways from the conversion of forest land to pasture, which created favorable habitat for nesting and foraging. Although the species avoids woodlands, pairs are remarkably adaptable: they will nest on beaches, ledges, stumps, burned and barren land, cultivated fields, and, for at least the past century, flat rooftops (Bent 1940). Rooftops are used extensively in the eastern U.S. where barren, undisturbed land for nesting is scarce. Consequently, Common Nighthawks may be readily found in many urban areas.

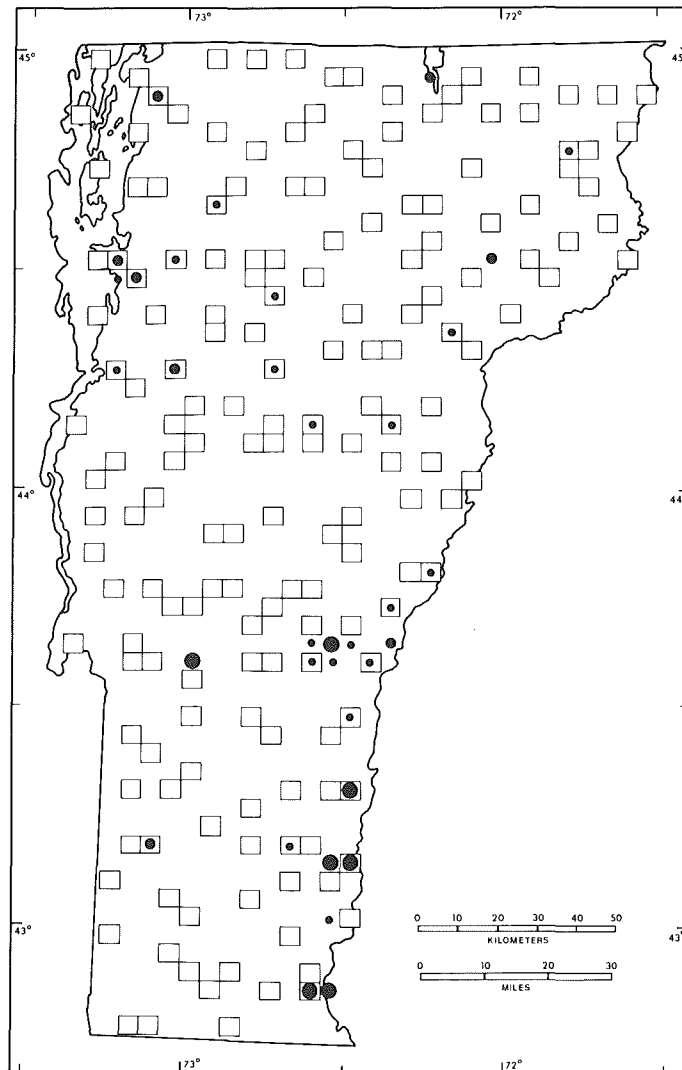
Because much of Vermont is densely wooded, suitable breeding habitat for nighthawks is restricted to agricultural areas within the Champlain Lowlands and to urban areas, particularly along the Connecticut River (Brattleboro and Bellows Falls). The species was rarely encountered by Atlas Project workers in mountainous and highland portions of the state, even where dairying activities seemed to provide adequate acreage of overgrazed pastures for nesting, and was found in only 13% of all priority blocks.

Their aerial displays and foraging behavior make Common Nighthawks easy to identify as probable breeders. Confirmation is considerably harder to achieve because of the inaccessibility of rooftop nest sites, the difficulty in detecting the cryptically colored eggs and young, and the near impossibility of seeing food or fecal sacs being carried by the adults. All 6 confirmations in Vermont were based on the discovery of either eggs



or young (some of the young were restored to rooftops by Vermont Institute of Natural Science staff after preflight falls).

Nighthawks, which winter from northern South America into central Argentina, may return to Vermont during the third week of May. Courtship display activity peaks in June. Pairs nest singly, and are territorial. Limited nest site availability, however, may result in nesting aggregations. Although inactive during the day, which they spend on the ground or perched lengthwise on a stout tree limb, Common Nighthawks, like many other Caprimulgids, have evolved a dramatic twilight courtship performance (Bent 1940). The male circles high over the nesting site uttering sharp, nasal *peent* calls while the female sits below. Periodically he swoops to within a few feet of her before making an abrupt upward turn, producing a bellowing or booming noise with his flight feathers—a sound that has led to the colloquial name of “bullbat” because of its resemblance to the bellowing of a bull. Following several repetitions of this aerial display the male lands beside the female, spreads his white tail bar (lacking in the female) in a fan, and wags it while rocking his body. He distends his throat to display the white throat patch (buff in the female) and utters guttural croaking notes. The male continues his aerial performance throughout the nesting period, although he assists



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 23 (13%)

Possible breeding: 15 (65% of total)

Probable breeding: 5 (22% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 3 (13% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	7	22	30.4
Green Mountains	2	4	9.0
North Central	1	5	4.2
Northeast Highlands	1	6	4.2
East Central	3	16	13.0
Taconic Mountains	1	6	4.2
Eastern Foothills	8	33	35.0

in feeding the incubating female and young and may occasionally share incubation duties (Bent 1940).

The 2 eggs, creamy white to greenish and speckled with brown and gray, are laid directly on barren ground (or bare roof) without apparent effort to produce a nest or scrape. If nest site temperatures are excessively hot the eggs may be moved. Incubation lasts 19 to 20 days. Egg dates for Vermont (five records) range from May 31 to June 17. The young may fly at 3 weeks of age but remain dependent on the adults for a while afterward. Unfledged young have been recorded as late as July 28 in Vermont

and August 14 in New York (Bull 1974).

Southbound migration begins in August and is completed in Vermont by mid September. Large flocks of nighthawks may occasionally be seen during the day or evening in fall migration, particularly along the Connecticut River valley, where counts have ranged up to 400 birds. Data from *Records of Vermont Birds* and those compiled by the Massachusetts Audubon Society in the 1970s indicate that the Connecticut River valley serves as one of the primary nighthawk flyways through New England.

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