

Common Nighthawk



Chordeiles minor

Identification

Common nighthawks are a medium-sized member of the nightjar family, approximately 8.7-9.4 in/22-24 cm long. They are a distinct-looking bird: slender with long, pointed wings, medium-to-long tail, short neck, flat head, small bill, and large eyes. They have prominent white patches towards the wingtips and a white throat patch visible in flight. Males also have a white tail band. Otherwise, this cryptic bird has gray, buff, and black mottling over much of its body and wings.



Photo credit: [Andy Reago and Chrissy McClarren](#)/Flickr

Observation Tips

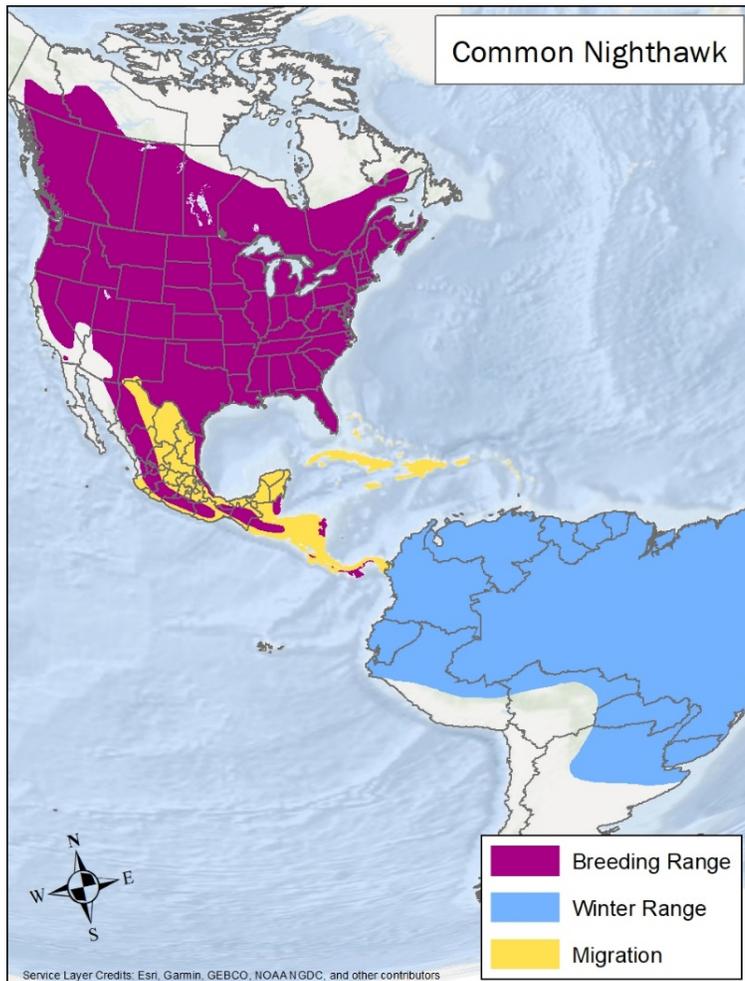
In the spring and summer, the common nighthawk can be seen feeding on insects in both rural and urban areas of North America. Although called a “nighthawk”, it is actually most active when feeding at dawn and dusk. You may hear their sharp, buzzy *peent* call when they are flying overhead or a “booming” sound when males dive downwards (see below). Common nighthawks are typically solitary but may flock up during migration. They spend winters throughout South America to northern Argentina.

Interesting Fact

Male common nighthawks are known for their dramatic “booming” flight display. When flying above the trees, a male will dive towards the ground and abruptly pull out of the dive, sometimes just above the ground. As he flexes his wings downward, the air rushes across his wingtips, making a booming or whooshing sound. The male may dive to impress a female or scare intruders, such as people.

Ideal Habitat

Common nighthawks breed in a variety of open areas across North America, including coastal sand dunes and beaches, logged or burned forests, forest openings, grassland and sagebrush prairies, dryland farm fields, and rock outcrops. They usually place nests on open ground and therefore need areas with $\geq 10\%$ bare ground. They sometimes nest on flat gravel roofs or near logs, boulders, grass clumps, or shrubs. Common nighthawks use farmlands, river valleys, marshes, coastal dunes, and open woodlands during migration.



Range map provided by BirdLife International

Management Activities that Benefit Species – Best Management Practices (BMPs)

Forest thinning may increase breeding habitat for common nighthawks by creating open ground for nesting. Moderately grazed grasslands with natural or human stock ponds may also increase breeding habitat for common nighthawks. If replacing a flat gravel roof with other material (e.g., rubber), consider placing gravel pads in the corners of the new roof to create nesting sites for common nighthawks.

Management Activities to Avoid

Avoid the use of pesticides where possible as they reduce aerial insects, which are the main food source for nighthawks. In arid shrublands, shrub removal may degrade common nighthawk breeding habitat. Avoid conversion of native grasslands to cropland or shrublands.

Other Species that Benefit from Similar Habitat Management

Other species that may benefit from habitat management for common nighthawks include the barn swallow, western kingbird, and eastern kingbird.

Other Resources

BirdLife International and Handbook of the Birds of the World. 2019. Bird species distribution maps of the world. Version 2019.1. [Common Nighthawk](#)

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Birds of the World [Common Nighthawk](#)

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology. All About Birds [Common Nighthawk](#)