

Wildlife Diversity Notebook: Whip-poor-will

By Karen McClure

Common Name: Whip-poor-will, also known as one of the nightjars or goatsuckers, the common family name. Nightjar refers to the bird's ability to "jar" or startle one with their loud songs at night. Goatsucker refers to an old legend that these birds fed by milking goats at night.

Scientific name: *Caprimulgus vociferous* (cap-rih-MUL-gus voh-SIFF-er-us), which loosely translates to "goatsucker" and "loud outcry."

Description: When you think whip-poor-will, think camouflage. These birds are mostly gray, black and brown with black throats. The adult male does have white tips on his largest tail feathers. The adult female has narrow buffy tips on the same feathers. Both birds have relatively large heads with tiny bills, tiny feet, and rounded tails. Whip-poor-wills are about 10 inches tall, about the size of a blue jay. These birds weigh in at 1-½ to 2 ounces. Whip-poor-wills are named for their loud, rhythmic song — *whip-poor-will* — which they sing repeatedly at nighttime. Whip-poor-will songs are commonly used as sound effects in television and movies.

Whip-poor-wills might be confused with the common nighthawk, which is not a hawk at all, but another member of the goatsucker family. Nighthawks are more urban, and can be spotted flying around lights at baseball parks, eating insects that are attracted to the bright lights. Nighthawks have wings that go back past their forked tails at rest, while the whip-poor-will's wings are shorter. The other nightjar that could be confusing is the much larger Chuck-will's-widow, which is quite rare in the Mountain State. Chuck-will's-widow has a brown throat. All three are easily identified by song. The nighthawk makes a nasal "peet," not unlike a woodcock. Chuck-will's-widow sings its name, with a very soft "chuck." Whip-poor-wills sing their song about once per second, and it is not rare to hear a set of 50-100 repetitions at a single concert.



Steve and Dave Maslowski

Whip-poor-wills do not build a nest. The female lays two eggs, light colored with dark marks, on the leaf-covered ground.

Habitat: Whip-poor-wills breed in dry forests of deciduous trees or mixed woods with little understory. In winter, whip-poor-wills live in mixed forests that are near clearings.

Range: Whip-poor-wills breed in the summer in southeastern Canada through the east-central United States. They migrate through the southeastern United States and winter in Mexico and Central America. In West Virginia, whip-poor-wills are most common in wooded rural areas in the western part of the state.

Diet: Whip-poor-wills are insectivorous, specializing in moths and beetles. These birds catch their prey while flying silently at night with their tiny bills open to reveal giant mouths. Whip-poor-wills are not above catching ground-bound prey, like caterpillars.

Life history: Whip-poor-wills do not build a nest. The female lays two eggs, light colored with dark marks, on the leaf-covered ground. The egg laying is timed so that the eggs often hatch 10 days before the next full moon, so the birds have extra light for hunting when the hatchlings are hungry. The male protects the nest by hovering with his body held vertically, and his tail feathers spread, showing off the broad white tips when intruders approach. As far as we know, the female does all the incubation for around 20 days.

The downy precocial hatchlings can move around soon after hatching. The parents encourage them to move apart, possibly to avoid predation. Young whip-poor-wills can fly when they are 20 days old. Whip-poor-wills are truly nocturnal, sleeping on the ground during the day, blending in with the leaf cover. When they do perch, whip-poor-wills sit lengthwise on a tree branch to blend in with the limb. Whip-poor-wills take frequent dust baths, and the evidence can be found in dirt roads by careful observers. The oldest whip-poor-will recorded was almost 4 years old, but most likely they can live longer.

Field notes: Whip-poor-wills have been heard in recent years in Beech Fork State Park and the Upper Mud River Wildlife Management Area on summer evenings. Go to the Bluebird Trail near the campground at Beech Fork, or the dam parking area or recreation area at Upper Mud.

Conservation and potential threats: Ground nesting birds, like whip-poor-wills are especially vulnerable to terrestrial predators. Domestic cats are exotic carnivores against which our native animals have little defense. Keeping cats indoors has been proven to greatly decrease the unnecessary mortality of birds like whip-poor-wills.

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