

The Bird that Represents Summer

By Larry Hyslop



A common nighthawk awakened on its roost

I walked past this bird several times, seeing only a bump on the fence rail, perhaps a rough knot in the wood, at least until the wood knot opened its eyes. Only when it flew off could my brain transform it into a nighthawk.

Such superb camouflage allows the bird to appear as a brown lump, so different than the graceful bird I am used to seeing. To me, this bird is the perfect image of summer. When I see my first nighthawk swooping through the sky I know summer has arrived.

Probably most of us have walked past a perched nighthawk, as most of us have probably seen them in flight. In the air, a nighthawk's slim body and narrow wings look like an overly-stylized falcon. The wings are swept back much like a fighter jet. The bird is a mottled brown but the best identifier is white stripes across the outer wings. Males also carry a white throat.

Their flight is usually observed at dusk and dawn, and best described as erratic. Slow, measured wing beats suddenly become rapid, as its path changes from smooth and level flight to quick curves and swoops until it captures and eats a flying insect. A nasal "peent" call can sometimes be heard, but you need to listen carefully to hear the male's display. He circles high in the air before diving toward the ground. He pulls out of the dive at the last second, accompanied by a deep whirring sound produced by his wings. Since people often see nighthawks at night and hear its booming sounds, it is sometimes called a bullbat.

What is usually not seen is the bird's enormous mouth lined with bristles. These adaptations help capture moths, beetles, flying ants, mosquitoes and other flying insects during flight. Common nighthawks are sometimes seen circling baseball field lights, picking off insects attracted to the lights. They even drink water on the fly, dipping their lower mandible into a pond or stream as they fly close to its surface.

Females generally build nests on open ground although have been known to use fence posts or gravel roofs. They will try to distract a person walking too close to the nest.

Since they are most active at dawn and dusk, they roost most of the day. Nighthawks like to hide on a flat limb, although a fence rail also works fine, usually allowing it to safely sleep in plain view.

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