
Profile

Chuck-will's-widow

Caprimulgus carolinensis

The Chuck-will's-widow is the largest nightjar in North America. Its name comes from its distinctive call, an emphatic *chuck-will's-WI-dow* with an accent on the third syllable.

Non-bird watchers often misidentify this bird as its more famous cousin, the Whip-poor-will.

The Chuck-will's-widow breeds in the southeastern United States and winters in Central America, Columbia, and the Greater Antilles. A few individuals may winter along the U.S. Gulf Coast.

Chuck-will's-widow has a huge flat head and long wings. It's significantly larger than Common Nighthawk and Whip-poor-will.

Males have white on the outer 3 tail feathers and a rufous with white collar on the throat.

Females have a buffy collar on the throat and lack the white on their tail feathers. Males are also slightly larger than females. Immature individuals resemble females, and there is no seasonal variation in plumage.

The Chuck-will's-widow's most apparent behavior is its incessant calling at night. It mostly calls at dusk and pre-dawn when it does most of its foraging, although during full moons or under street lights, when visibility is good, it may forage much of the night.

Males sing from 16 to 30 times per minute from a perch; females don't sing but may answer muted calls from males while on the nest. There is more singing on warmer nights.

Males sing through courtship, discontinue singing during the nesting period, and begin to sing again before fall migration. Songs are thought to be to attract mates and advertise a breeding territory. Chuck-will's-widows also have different kinds of calls used when



startled or in territorial defense. They also hiss when threatened.

The Chuck-will's-widow hunts actively by flying just above the ground, often along woodland edges, at night in search of insects.

They eat mainly moths, beetles—including June beetles, scarabs, longhorned beetles, and click beetles—and dragonflies. Occasionally, small birds and bats are included in the diet.

Chuck-will's-widows use their rictal bristles, the bristles around their wide mouths, to scoop up insects. They may also forage on the ground for insects or frogs, especially when they are molting.

Chuck-will's-widows are often observed on roads where they collect rocks, presumably to help them grind and digest their insect prey. In a car's headlights, their eyes reflect a bright orange eyeshine.

Chuck-will's-widows breed in pine, oak-hickory, and other forests of the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic states. They tend to live in more open areas than the similar Whip-poor-will.

Most populations arrive on breeding grounds in March and begin breeding in April. Pairs form within 10 days

of females arriving on the breeding grounds.

Chuck-will's-widows don't build nests; they simply lay their eggs on the ground among dead leaves, pine needles, or bare dirt. No material is added to the nest. Typically, their nests are in densely vegetated areas with little or no underbrush. They show high site fidelity from one year to the next.

Females lay one neutral colored egg every other day for 3 days, resulting in a clutch size of 2 (although 1 to 4 is possible). Incubation takes 20 days and starts with

the first egg laid. Adults do not flush easily from nests, possibly because their colors help to camouflage them, the eggs, and eventually the young. They are virtually invisible.

Chicks can fly at 17 days but remain dependent on parents for another 14 days. Chuck-will's-widows will continue to replace eggs or clutches that are preyed on up to four times in a season, but they generally raise only one brood each year.

Their coloration and nocturnality make Chuck-will's-widows less vulnerable to predation, although their ground-nesting habits make them somewhat vulnerable to terrestrial predators. There is little information on predation on Chuck-will's-widows, but snakes and mammalian predators such as raccoons are suspected nest predators.

When disturbed near a nest, adults will attack a threat or perform a distraction display, such as dragging their wings on the ground as they walk away while hissing.

There is little information on life-span of Chuck-will's-widows in the wild, but the longevity record based on banding is 14 years and 10 months old.