

## Poor-will's aren't sad about the fire!



Eastern whip-poor-will  
Photo provided by Ontario.ca

The eastern whip-poor-will (*Caprimulgus vociferus*) is, without contest, one of Ontario's most unique and bizarre birds. This little gem is a member of the family Caprimulgidae, also known as 'goat suckers' for the large mouths possessed by many members of this group (erroneously assumed to be used for sucking milk from goats). With excellent and cryptic camouflage, the whip-poor-will is a bird most often heard on warm spring and summer nights rather than seen. The mournful, flute-like 'whip-poor-will' call can be heard at night in open areas during migrations, as well as sandy pine barrens and similar open areas where the whip-poor-wills breed. Sadly, the call of the whip-poor-will in Ontario is all but a memory. Older generations recall hearing them, but most haven't heard them in years, and many young people have never gotten the chance to hear this at all. This isn't just a case of 'nature deficit disorder' and people not getting outside, these birds are declining.

In Ontario, eastern whip-poor-wills have been listed as Threatened. The exact reasons why are assumed but still poorly understood. A major reason for declines is thought to be habitat loss due to development, but especially because of fire suppression in pine woodlands. In the natural forest, low level ground fires occasionally happen that rid the forest floor of debris and overgrowth, creating open areas used by birds like the whip-poor-will and American woodcock, and burning fuel that prevents larger, more destructive forest fires from being able to rage. Forestry practices of the last few decades have sought to suppress forest fires, and in so doing have displaced important open woodland ecosystems.

Whip-poor-wills belong to a group of birds called the 'aerial insectivores'. These are birds that catch insects on the wing and include common nighthawks, as well as songbirds like flycatchers and swallows. These birds have all been declining steeply throughout North America, and one reason is thought to be the decline in insects. In the case of the whip-poor-will, adults lay eggs based on the lunar cycle. Eggs are timed to hatched 10 days before the full moon, on which adults fly and gather massive quantities of large insects under, specifically sphinx moths and wild silk moths (like the pine imperial moth). If climate change is causing these moths to come out at the wrong time, as well as a change in ecosystem structure and invasive predators causing nesting areas and prey to decline, you have a perfect storm for a species to decline.



Photo: Tracey McCann

Whip-poor-wills can still be heard in many areas of Ontario, particularly the **Kawartha Highlands Provincial Park**. You can help these birds by planting native plant gardens that encourage native moths and insects, as well as garden pools that encourage insects such as midges to breed (harmless species that make up a large percentage of aerial insectivore diets in spring). As always, report your sightings online to The Land Between or to eBird.org.