

Nightjars While Nest-watching

A Personal Review of Turtle Nesting Season and the Excitement of Birdwatching

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Turtle nesting season has just finished. I was out with my team of technicians conducting research on roads and in the evenings, on nesting sites, for the past month. For myself, turtle nesting season was filled with nature experiences that included much more than just encountering turtles. Although finding and measuring numerous turtles fuelled my excitement for nesting season, the chance to experience nature in the ways that I had during the month of June (nesting season) made me feel closer to nature than I had in a long time. Whether it was watching White-tailed Deer traipse through a marsh to cool itself during the 30°C+ days, or a mother American Woodcock teach its fledgling how to do its signature



“rocking” dance to convince worms to come to the surface for easy feeding, nature revealed itself to me during this last month in ways I have never experienced. Perhaps most exciting for me, however, was the chance to witness birds that I had not previously observed.

I am an avid bird-watcher and if you are a birdwatcher like myself, you are likely familiar with the term “Life-list” or “Lifer”. For those that aren’t, the life-list is a list of bird species that have been observed during our time birdwatching. Some people complete monthly, yearly or even backyard life-lists. For myself, I aim to simply complete an Ontario life list, hoping to observe all of Ontario’s approximately 300 bird species. As you can imagine, finding a bird that is not on your life-list is quite exciting, especially when it is a species-at-risk in Ontario.

In Ontario, there are 41 species-at-risk birds, 35 of which are within The Land Between boundaries. Of these 35 species-at-risk, I had the pleasure of observing 9 of these species with 4 of these being lifers for me, all within the month of June. The most exciting observations for me were the 5 different Eastern Whip-poor-wills I heard while processing turtles, which are exciting as they are one of two focus species for another project conducted by The Land Between (the other being the Common Nighthawk).



Whippoorwill by Jean Iron

Belonging to the family Caprimulgidae, Eastern Whip-poor-wills and Common Nighthawks are nocturnal aerial insectivores (meaning they eat insects in flight the air), which are often called Nightjars or sometimes Goatsuckers due to the belief by ancient Greeks that these birds sucked the blood from goats (Bird 2010). These birds spend most of their day hidden on the ground or on branches or fences, camouflaged by their naturally dull

coloration which helps them blend in with the foliage around them (Bird 2010). Nightjars are a migratory bird that leaves Ontario for South America during the colder months when insects begin to become more dormant, as insects are their primary food source (Bird 2010). Because of their nocturnal habits, these birds are more often heard than seen. Eastern whip-poor-wills can be determined by their classic “Whip-poor-will, whip-poor-will, whip-poor-will” repeated call, often starting around dusk. Common Nighthawks do not have such a distinctive call, rather an insect-like “veep”. While many birds sound similar, most birds are not actively calling

around dusk/night; if this sound is heard during this time, there's a good chance you're hearing a Common Nighthawk!

In Ontario, Nightjars are a species-at-risk due to a decreasing population likely due to insecticide use as well as loss of suitable habitat. The use of insecticides on insects results in the poisoning of birds who consume these insects. These birds, as well as all aerial insectivores, are an important part of their ecosystems as they are an effective tool for insect management. In fact, Common Nighthawks consume more than 10,000 mosquitoes in one night. Insecticides that are problematic also include the "natural" ones that are sold as methods for controlling mosquitoes. In addition to harming bird life, they can harm fish too and move up the food web to other species. Beyond wildlife, these products are not safe for pregnant women and that alone should indicate a reason to be concerned.

Because of their nocturnal behaviour, and their rarity, you can imagine my excitement as I heard not one but five individual Whippoorwills calling during the night while on the roads to research turtles. This indicates there is a healthy population of Nightjars within The Land Between; but they still need our help. The Land Between runs a program for monitoring Nightjars and their habitats. If you believe you have heard either a Common Nighthawk or Eastern whip-poor-will, and are within the boundaries of The Land Between, please visit <https://www.thelandbetween.ca/whippoorwill-surveys/> to report your sighting. With your help, we can ensure proper protection of their habitat to ensure a continuing population of these wonderfully feathered friends within The Land Between!

Literature Cited:

Bird, David N. 2010. Birds of Canada. Dorling Kindersley, Toppan, China.