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Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

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Common Nighthawk

Chordeiles minor

The Common Nighthawk is a common summer resident throughout Florida. This species is most active during the early daylight hours and in the late afternoon, flying an erratic path over fields and pastures as it searches for insects. During the midday hours this bird usually rests on horizontal tree limbs, fences, and utility wires. Nighthawks breed as far north as the Yukon and as far south as Panama; they migrate to and winter in South America from northern Argentina northward.

Habitat. Common Nighthawks inhabit old fields, pastures, cultivated areas, prairies, marshes, open pine forest, and beaches. Particularly favored nest sites are on bare, sandy soil and recently burned areas. They are also found in urban areas, where the birds frequently nest on flat gravel rooftops.

The diet of the Common Nighthawk is comprised of flying insects. Grasshoppers, beetles, moth, gnats, flying ants, and mosquitoes are but a few of the insects taken.

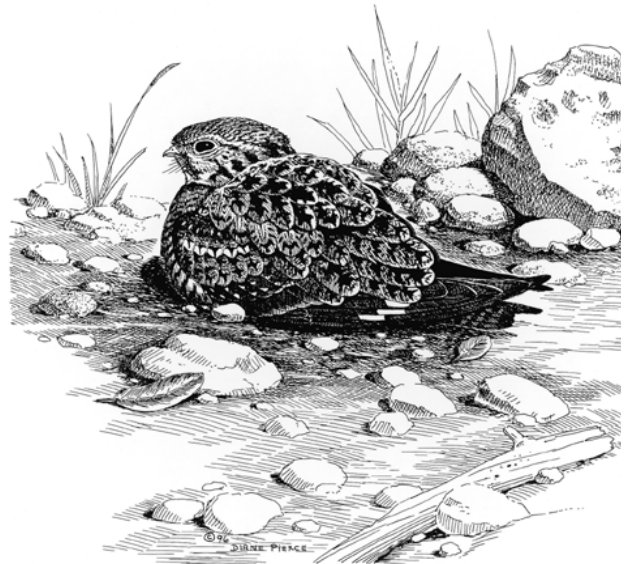


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The Common Nighthawk does not build a nest. Its two eggs are laid directly on the ground or rooftop. The glossy eggs are cream in color and heavily spotted with brown or black. During the course of incubation, the eggs may be gradually moved a few feet from where they were laid. Eggs hatch in approximately 19 days, and the young will move from the hatching site when 4 or 5 days old (Gross 1940). They are capable of flight at 21 days (Gross 1940; Mengel 1965, 285), but parental feeding continues for a few days past fledging (Weller 1958).

Seasonal Occurrence. The presence of overwintering Nighthawks in Florida confounds the establishment of spring migration dates (probably late March and early April). Flocks, sometimes quite large, of this species have been seen in southward migration, as early as July and August through November. Usual egg dates are in April and May, however, sets have been reported through late July (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

Status. The Common Nighthawk breeds throughout most of the state but is less common in the Lower Keys, where its range overlaps that of the Antillean Nighthawk. There is some indication that the Antillean Nighthawk is declining in the Upper Keys due to a southward spread of Common Nighthawks (P. W. Smith, in litt). Observations of apparent interspecific territorial defense have been noted in the Upper Keys (Stevenson et al. 1983). Even as it extended its range southward, there is some evidence that the Common Nighthawk is declining in Florida (Cox 1987b, Stevenson and Anderson 1994) as it has through much of its range. The species is listed on the American Birds Blue List (Tate 1986). The decline of this species and other insectivorous species may be the result of a decline in their food supply.

The absence of Common Nighthawks from scattered quadrangles on the mainland show no discernable pattern; however, inadequate Atlas coverage is more likely the reason for this rather than an absence of birds. The Common Nighthawk remains inactive during most daylight hours, therefore, it was necessary for Atlas fieldworkers to survey areas at dawn or dusk. The distinctive and dramatic courtship or territorial flights of the Common Nighthawk aided considerably in establishing "probable" breeding in many quadrangles.

R. David Goodwin

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