

Getting to Know the Common Nighthawk

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The Common Nighthawk is a species that is more likely to be heard than seen. They are experts of camouflage as their dark brown and speckled plumage blends into the ground. You might be able to see them in flight as they are distinguished by their long, narrow, pointed wings, and a distinctive white stripe near the tip of a slightly notched tail, as they swoop out over fields and roads.

The pointed wings make the nighthawk resemble a falcon in flight, which may have led to the misnomer of *hawk*. The Common Nighthawk has short legs and weak feet, and usually hops about awkwardly on the ground. For this reason, they perch lengthwise on branches or fences or directly on the ground.

A common sound you might hear in various places around Saskatchewan, from late May to August, is the distinctive nasal peent (hissing or throaty cluck) or booming of a Common Nighthawk. The booming sound is the wind rushing through their feathers as they dive. It has recently been discovered that nighthawks boom as a territorial signal and may be close to a nest.

Nighthawks nest directly on the ground, meaning they do not build up a nest, but usually lay two eggs on the rocky ground. The eggs are speckled and blend in well with the colours and textures of the ground. And even after the eggs

hatch, the fuzzy chicks are just as difficult to spot. Despite being well camouflaged, the eggs and chicks can be depredated by crows, ravens, gulls and many mammals. The adults can be predated by foxes, owls and falcons.

Common Nighthawks can use a range of habitats, such as grasslands, sand dunes, peatbogs, riverbanks, marshes, exposed mineral soils and gravel ridges, and their range covers most of Saskatchewan. They are known to attempt to adapt to urban expansion by nesting on flat rooftops.

Common Nighthawks are aerial insectivores; their prey consists of flying insects like beetles, moths, grasshoppers and dragonflies. Although their closed beak appears small, their mouth can open very wide to catch insects in flight. Nighthawks eat thousands of insects every night, and can act as a form of pest control like other insectivorous species, such as bats and swallows. They are most active at dawn and dusk, when there are low light levels, but are not strictly nocturnal like other closely-related species.



The fuzzy Common Nighthawk chicks are as difficult to spot on the rocky ground as the eggs (the speckled egg can be seen to the left of the chicks).

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The causes of Common Nighthawk declines are not well known, but it is thought to be related to insect declines, as many other insectivorous birds are also declining. Other factors that may have contributed to the declines include habitat loss and modification; increased predator population (specifically, Domestic Cats, Striped Skunks, Raccoons, American Crows, and Common Ravens); collisions with motor vehicles or structures; extreme weather events and climate change.

Some ways that you can help Common Nighthawks is by retaining natural habitats like grasslands, wetlands and forested areas. The condition of Common Nighthawk habitat is also vital and can be addressed through various management techniques, many of which you may already be doing, that include:

- Grazing and livestock management
- Restoration of wetlands and grasslands to support healthy insect populations
- Creation of a heterogeneous landscape
- Avoid using insecticide
- Slow down when driving on gravel roads



A common nighthawk can often be found perching on fences, branches or the ground.
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