

A beneficial bird of the Sequoia National Park.

by
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A most useful bird of the Sequoia National Park is the Pacific Nighthawk, (*Chordeiles virginianus hesperis*, Grinnell). These birds spend their entire life working for the benefit of mankind. Their food consists of insects, many of which are harmful to the forests and other flora of the park.

Pacific Nighthawks inhabit the Sequoia National Park during the spring, summer, and autumn, between the altitudes of from 6,000 to 11,000 feet; migrating southward and to the lower levels in late autumn when insect life becomes scarce. They breed throughout their range from May to July, depending on the altitude in which they live. The birds roost on logs, stumps, and rocks, but nest on the ground. The nest, if such it can be called, is simply a hollow in the ground with no lining. The birds lay two eggs of grayish white color, marbled, blotched and spotted with dark shades of gray; size, about 1.20" x .85".

Pacific Nighthawks are among the most peculiar and picturesque birds of the park. Roughly speaking the birds might be described as follows: They are long winged birds, body about the size of a robin; heads broad, eyes large, bills small, but with an extraordinarily large mouth, the opening of which extends beneath and beyond the eyes. They are chiefly dusk and night fliers, their food consists of insects which they catch on the wing. Their flight is erratic and close over the ground with many quick zigzag turns. Their plumage is soft and fluffy, mottled black, brownish and white. Their voice is a one or two syllable note, "zee-nt", "pee-ark, or "peent". During the mating and nesting season the male birds have a habit at about dusk in the evening, more especially so upon the approach of an intruder, of flying high in the air then suddenly dropping almost to the ground thus making a deep zooming sound. This noise I believe is produced by the bird dropping through the air at great speed, then spreading their wings suddenly just before the ground is hit. The long primaries vibrate rapidly and produce the noise. The birds are colored so that when they are quietly resting on the ground, or upon logs, stumps, or rocks, in the day time, they resemble their surroundings, or discolored patches upon the bark. They furnish, in such position, one of the most beautiful illustrations of protective mimicry that I have found in the whole realm of bird life.

Lucky indeed is the person who ever finds a nest of the Pacific Nighthawk, so thoroughly are their nests camouflaged as to blend in with the soil, rocks, and vegetation of the immediate surroundings. Then, too, the mother bird when flushed from her nest flies direct away from it and does not flutter along on the ground as do most ground-living birds. When returning to the nest she flies until directly over then drops suddenly upon it. In all my mountain experience never have I located only two nighthawk's nests within Sequoia National Park

On June 16, 1905, about sun rise, while camping at Crescent Meadow, altitude 6,600 feet, I noticed a Pacific Nighthawk flying low. Suddenly it dropped to the ground as if struck by a bullet, I stopped in an effort to locate the bird. Silently I stood there scrutinizing every rock and pebble in sight but no bird could I see. But in about five minutes I finally detected the birds eyes, but no outline of the body could I see. At times it seemed that I could visualize the body, but upon looking steadily at the object for just a few seconds all

became blurred, then completely effaced, owing to the birds protective coloring. I approached closer to the bird before she flew from her nest containing two eggs, which in color resembled closely the sand and shale upon which they lay.

Again, about noon, on July 13, 1918, while riding over a patch of granite shale and gravel just a little south of Blossom Lakes, altitude 10,750 feet, my horse almost stepped on a mother Pacific Nighthawk as she flew from her nest containing two young. When the bird flew from her nest she lit on a large boulder some fifty feet away, spread out her wings in a nervous quiver but no sound did she utter. About the time I had dismounted for the purpose of taking a look at the young birds, down came the male bird as if dropping from the sky and passing so close to my head that I could feel a swish in the air from his wings and a deep whoofing sound as if uttered by some wild animal. The sound was so great as to frighten my horse. The young in the nest were coated over with down of light gray color. Their eyes were still closed and when I touched them lightly on their backs they utter soft squeaky notes and opened wide their mouths, seemingly wide enough for their heads to fall in. I remained near the nest for some ten minutes, and all the while that male bird kept up his acrobatic stunts by flying high then dropping down past me every few seconds each time giving me a thrill by his doleful whoofing noise with his peculiar scolding notes of "pee-ark" or "pe-ent" with emphasis on the last syllable. All during the performance the mother bird moved nervously about on the boulder as if anchored to the spot by some mystic charm, and every little while she uttered soft plaintive notes of "zee-nt" in anxiety and fear. After I had ridden away some two-hundred yards both birds flew from my sight, but after a few moments wait I observed the mother winging her way back down over the mountain slope and drop suddenly on the spot of her beloved offspring.

A strange feature about the nests found was the fact that they were both located out in the open where they were exposed to the sun's rays and in plain sight of every passing enemy, notwithstanding the fact that there was shade and shelter nearby.

The question arises how do these harmless and practically defenceless birds defend themselves from animals and birds of prey in the day time, while resting and nesting in the open upon the ground. To me it seems clear that they avoid these dangers by choosing locations, where to the eyes at least, they often become completely effaced, owing to their protective coloration; for their spots give the effect of mere splotches of the ground and stone. When the sun is high, even though not far distant, the birds are often invisible; and frequently they disappear entirely.

In the olden times people credited the nighthawk and whippoorwill with the power of sucking goats and declared their presence undesirable. They believed this myth so implicitly that they named the family the goatsuckers, mainly because they could never see the birds eating from the ground, and because of the extremely large wide-spreading mouths with which the nighthawks and its relatives are endowed. While the common name Goatsucker was not well chosen, it is now too firmly established to be dislodged.

As to just how long the Pacific Nighthawk has been a resident of the Sequoia National Park, and what they have accomplished in matter of preserving our forests will never be known. But one thing certain we do know is that nothing but good could come from a bird that works its entire life for the benefit of man and boards itself. So let us hope that this highly beneficial bird will continue to thrive and perpetuate their kind in their chosen home of the high Sierras.

Unfortunately, in these days of good roads and fast automobiles the Nighthawk frequently falls a victim to the age of electricity and speed. The bird is dazzled by headlights and dashes into the car.