Nighthawk Watching

Surfing the internet for information on nighthawks—especially images, provides some interesting results. Most of the images feature fighter jets, guns, and buff men in strange costumes. This machismo is inspired by peculiar robin-sized birds with legs so weak they can't perch and with beaks so tiny as to be nearly invisible. These tiny beaks open to huge gaping mouths—very effective insect traps. Nighthawks are not hawks at all, but part of a group of birds known as "goatsuckers," and European myth would have us believe that they subsist on milk stolen from goats at night.

Watching and listening for nighthawks has long been a part evenings on the town in Brattleboro. After movies I would pause to look for them swooping above Elliot Street or the Harmony lot. Last summer, however, no nighthawks appeared.

My pleasant summer ritual disturbed, I searched for information to see where the nighthawks had gone. I learned from breeding bird atlases and other population surveys that nighthawks have been in decline throughout most of their North American range in the past twenty years; in some places the decline has been precipitous.

One of my sources of information was Tom Gagnon. He remembers watching these birds from his rooftop perch on boyhood evenings. Tom was not surprised to hear that no nighthawks had been observed over Brattleboro. For the past 29 years he has diligently monitored their fall migrations from a site near his home in Florence, Massachusetts. He has taken up his post every evening the weather permits from August 20 through September 7. For his first 22 years watching the migration he saw an average of 3,680 birds per year. His lowest count was in 2000 when he counted 1,340. Since then his average has been 1,600 birds.

I had never heard of nighthawk watching as a birding spectacle. I asked Tom to describe it. "The best night," he explained, "follows a big hatching of flying ants." Those are the evenings when the sky shimmers with insect wings. On such nights he used to expect to see over 1,000 nighthawks. His record for one evening was 3,673 birds in 1991. On a good night the birds formed a spiraling kettle of as many as 500 birds. Tom doesn't expect to see flocks of 500 anymore. He confessed that he often leaves his post now with a deep sadness.

To understand the possible causes of nighthawk decline, one must consider their lives and habits. These birds are among the most prodigious migrators of American birds. Many breed in Canada and then head back to South America, some as far south as the Argentine pampas. Nighthawks feed for just a brief period each day—an hour and a half before dark, and a bit over an hour at dawn. To meet their metabolic needs they must capture many flying insects during these bouts of feeding. Their stomachs have been found to contain hundreds of insects.

Each summer a nighthawk pair will produce two eggs, which are laid on the ground, often in a gravelly area. The chicks are able to move about on their own within one day of hatching, but depend on their parents for food. Within fifty days they are ready to join a flock—a mere seven weeks of childhood. Sometime between 1895 and 1920, nighthawks discovered the flat gravel rooftops in cities and towns and adopted them as preferred breeding sites, and so became part of our urban wildlife community.

This combination of features has served the nighthawk well, but long migrations, restricted feeding times, ground nesting, and a low reproductive rate

are among the qualities that make the species vulnerable on this rapidly changing planet. My research turned up a number possibilities to explain the population drop. Cats, raccoons, and other predators have followed the advance of human settlement, and the eggs and chicks of ground nesting birds are especially vulnerable. An influx of crows into towns might be a factor in the decline. Rooftop eggs and chicks would provide easy dining for these omnivores. Others suggest that a reduction of nighthawk food might be to blame. Many moth species have declined as result of our attempts to control gypsy moths and tent caterpillars. Efforts to control mosquitoes in the Northeast can also be linked to the beginning of the nighthawk decline. A switch from gravel to rubberized roof surfaces might be responsible for some of the decline we're seeing in towns. In their South American winter homes, pesticides outlawed here are still widespread. Use of these chemicals might impact these birds.

Hope for the future of nighthawks comes from a group of bird species that seized the conservation spotlight when their populations dropped to dangerous lows. Their survival and recovery can be attributed to the hard work of many people. This group includes the common loon, the peregrine falcon, the bald eagle, and the osprey. The good news, then, is that once awareness has been raised, people will look for solutions, and sometimes species can be saved. I'll grant you, loons and eagles have better name recognition than the nighthawk, but I think these odd goatsuckers could have the charisma needed to gain our support, if enough people know about them. My nighthawk-hunting sidekick and I did find one nighthawk residing in Brattleboro this summer. One is not enough to grow the population, but maybe next year there will be more.

The Connecticut River Valley is one of New England's most important nighthawk migration corridors, so we are well positioned to follow the fortunes of this notable goatsucker. For the next two weeks, look for them winging down the river valleys at dusk, especially on nights when the flying ants have hatched. The more we can learn, and the more we can tell our friends and neighbors this story, the better the chance it will have a happy ending. Keep your eyes on the skies.

If you see migrating nighthawks, please call the Bonnyvale Environmental Education Center at 257-5785 to pass along the details!