



UNDER THE NIGHTJAR MOON

Where to begin, first thought I always have when I decide to create, the answer is always the same.....at the beginning and so.....

Back around June 8th our trusted NipNat/Bird Wing Scribe and point woman for birding stuff, sent out an email she had received from Kevin Hannah. He's a Population Assessment Biologist at the Canadian Wildlife Service, Environment and Climate Change Canada. You'll recall some of us assisted him a couple of years ago with another study. His request was for volunteer surveyors to collect "citizen scientist" data on the Nightjar population in Ontario. This is the same format that many of us already participate in with the Bird Studies Canada programs.

Well I looked at Con and asked, are we up to this at this time in the season? Of course her answer was yes. So I stuck up my hand, or rather sent Kevin an email to volunteer.

Now as we all know?? Nightjars are a family of cryptic birds that forage for flying insects at night. These beautiful birds have long, pointed wings for flight, and are highly camouflaged against the leaves and branches they roost upon during the day. Many of these species are highly migratory, spending their winters as far south as Argentina. During the summer, nightjars breed across Canada, generally laying two eggs directly on the ground with no nest. Due to their nocturnal behaviour and cryptic appearance, nightjars are rarely seen, so it is most important to learn how to identify nightjars by sound!

(extracted from: Canadian Nightjar Survey Protocol – 2018 document).

So the group is comprised of the Common Nighthawk, Eastern Whip-poor-will and in the western provinces the Common Poorwill. The first 2 species are listed as "THREATENED" due to their population declines, hence the immediate need to find out more about them.

My next thought was, I'll call on our other bird survey partners daughter Rachel and new Nip-Nat'er Matt Proconier to form our team of ears. Needless to say both were enthusiastic. Next I perused the map for a good route and several nearby were available. I chose the route called CARR which is mostly along Highway 534 where we live, "our street" in ci-

tyspeak. Now Carr according to Bing and Google maps (and those systems that rule too much of our lives) is at the intersection of Pilger's Road and Hwy 524 which is only a half kilometer east of 534 and 524 corners. (Another lost fact of rural Ontario from a century ago). The route starts here with Stop 1 and runs east along 534 and King Sideroad, back to 534 and eventually left on Hwy 654 in to Nipissing with stops approximately every 1.6 kilometres. The route ends at the second entrance to the Union Cemetery, a very quiet spot late on a full moon evening.

Now as to the format, those familiar with the Nocturnal Owl Survey will recognize the similarities between these surveys. The Nightjar one is more detailed at each stop and the manner of recording a bird is different.

The survey is to be done between mid June and mid July preferably within 1 week either side of the Full Moon. There are 12 stops and at each the surveyor listens for 6 minutes in 1 minute intervals (helps to have someone with a stop watch or smart phone that'll do it). The weather conditions, noise and traffic are also recorded at each stop as well as temperature at start and finish times. The survey commences 30 minutes before the exact Sunset time for your locale and at 9 or 10 minutes per stop you should be finished in 2 hours and on your way home.

At this point we did not pick a date for the survey but were waiting for weather reports closer to the full moon event. Additionally assistant surveyor Rachel is teaching a summer course and would not be available until a Thursday evening. We didn't want to do the survey on a Friday or weekend due to traffic and the fact Hwy. 534 has very narrow shoulders to park on. In preparation surveyors are encouraged to listen to the call and "wing booms" of the Night Hawk and the signature call of the Whip-Poor-Will on various birding websites. The former makes a whooshing sound as it dives with its wings as part of the courting ritual. Several wing booms in a minute are significant as it indicates one serious dude! As for the latter, if encountered there will be no doubt about what it is.

Con and I did a planning run one afternoon about 2 weeks in advance of the survey. Using our GPS we found the stops, recorded identifiable landmarks for example, Across from the Baird Honey sign or 50m west of Barber Road and we picked safe parking spots. Finally 2 days in advance of the Survey Date and 30 minutes before Sunset, we did a trial run starting at Stop 1 and doing several stops, listening and all. We were hoping to hear some survey candidates. We had no luck until at Stop 12, the cemetery, in the growing darkness and with just 2 minutes left we finally got a WHIP-POOR-WILL.....again and again. Hey that's promising!

Well Thursday Survey evening finally arrived 1 day before the full moon and so did Rachel after a 4 hour drive. There was a lot of vacation traffic already heading north in advance of the Canada Day weekend. Young Matt arrived spot on 8:00 o'clock so we reviewed our bits and pieces, documents, flashlights, compass etc. and off we went. Arriving at Stop 1 we set up, there was a farmer completing his bailing (being a city born boy never would have known this or been this specific before but I've been countrified) in the

nearby field so the noise level was high. Thankfully he finished after minute 2 and made his way across the highway to his farm, just minor tractor noise after that. Well not surprisingly we had No Joy at this stop so on to Stop 2.

We hadn't really noticed before but the wind was picking up, condition 2 or 3 on the survey rating and with it there was increasing tree leaf and branch rustle. The mosquitoes were growing very bold and annoying and also there was a lot of bird noise and activity, not surprising. None of this helped when listening selectively.

Well on and on we went, with no luck with our targets species, lots of Thrushes, Sparrows, Robins, Crows, Warblers and others. Somewhat disappointed, we arrived at Stop 10 on the King Road, surrounded by woods and tree rustling, and plagued by mosquitoes we set up. Nothing as expected but then at minute 4, Con and I thought we heard an "eeent". Rachel and Matt at the other end of the stop heard something as well and when we got together to listen sure enough it was a pweent, the call of a Common Nighthawk. We had success!

This raised our collective morale and off we went to Stop 11, but no luck and then Stop 12 the cemetery. Having heard the Whip-poor-will 2 nights earlier our expectations were high, but alas all was as quiet as a "cemetery", but there was a lovely moon!

Well we all went off home tired, safe and itchy. Rachel left for Toronto bright and early, having made a long drive for a very short 1 night visit. In retrospect we should have likely cancelled the survey that night. Too much noise, wind and traffic, we recorded 19 vehicles which is by far the largest number we've ever encountered on any survey. But busy young Matt and Rachel had scheduled their time and so we went with what we had.

In the next days I recorded the data on line, cumbersome process, next year I'll print, scan and email. But for sure it's a survey we plan to do again and again.

There are lots of routes still available as close as Bonfield. Anyone interested in info can access the [Canadian Nighthawk Survey Protocol](#) documentation by contacting **Kevin Hannah (Canadian Wildlife Service): kevin.hannah@canada.ca** or contact me, I'll email you the information and link.