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Natural History Notes

MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is presently a staff member of the University of Minnesota's Bell Museum of Natural History. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.



THE ACROBAT OF THE NIGHT

The nighthawk is often referred to as the "nocturnal patrolman" as it performs its aerial antics from dusk to dawn. A single bird may catch and devour several thousand mosquitoes in a single night as it dive-bombs through the sky. The nighthawk is often confused with its close relative the whip-poor-will, but a few simple characteristics distinguish the two. A nighthawk has a notched tail, at rest its wings are folded straight back and are longer than the tail. The whip-poor-will has a rounded tail and its wings, when folded, are shorter than the tail.

When courting, the male nighthawk flies high in the sky; then with its wings folded, dives downward and just before reaching the ground zooms sharply upward, making a whirring noise. Sit quietly outside at dusk and you will hear the whirring sound produced by the diving male.

The female selects her mate based on his skillful display. Two eggs are laid on open ground. No nest is built and the two grayish eggs blend into the background very well. Most birds sit on their eggs to keep them warm but on sunny days the nighthawk must sit on her eggs to keep them cool and protect them from the frying rays of the sun. Their dark color absorbs the heat of the sun and if they reach a temperature higher than 104°F the chicks inside will die. The mother uses two methods to keep her eggs cool; while sitting on the eggs she rotates with the sun, like a sun dial, to produce the greatest amount of shade; she also fluffs her feathers, creating air spaces so the wind can blow through and cool her body much like a simple air conditioner. These two



NIGHTHAWK

methods can lower the nest site temperature by as much as 20°F on a hot sunny day. After an incubation period of about 18 days both parents care for the young.

Nighthawks nesting here in Wisconsin migrate to South America as far south as Argentina to spend the winters where they feed and await spring only to return and repeat the courting ritual and raise a family. They are protected by Federal Law and are one of our key natural insect controllers. This bird may go on performing its aerial antics unnoticed by man, but if you think the bugs are bad now, think of the millions more there would be without the nighthawk.



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