

Nighthawk Down

EMILY JOHNSEN

In the late summer of 2012, forest fires raged in both the Madison and Paradise valleys in southwestern Montana. Smoke and flames flushed migrating birds toward the more populated, but blaze-free, Gallatin Valley. Unfortunately for common nighthawks, the peak of their regional migration coincided exactly with the worst of the forest fires.

It was mid-afternoon on August 28; I had been inundated with northern flickers driven from their homes by the same devastating fires. The phone rang and I inwardly cringed. The caller was Jillian, one of the techs at a veterinary clinic in Bozeman, Montana. She sounded both excited and a bit frightened as she described the small “owl” brought into the clinic by a young man named Chris. Chris had extricated this owl from a band of opportunistic, hungry magpies. The small bird was reportedly very aggressive, opening her wide mouth threateningly and screeching at her would-be rescuers.



Nighthawks often blend in with their perches, making them difficult to spot during the day.

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Jillian also reminded me about the clinic's policy of euthanizing injured and orphaned wild animals; I told her I was on my way. I grabbed my heavy-duty work gloves and modified puppy crate, then headed out to pick up what I thought might be an injured or sick northern pygmy-owl. Black-billed magpies are clever, voracious feeders, but are unlikely to

mess with a healthy adult raptor, even the pint-sized pygmy-owl. Therefore, it made sense that something other than the mischievous corvid clan had grounded the bird.

By the time I arrived at the clinic, good-Samaritan Chris had left the scene. A small cardboard box sat conspicuously on the reception counter. "Is this the bird?" I blurt-

ed out, before I had even cleared the threshold. I tend to get right to the point in these matters. One sanctioning nod from Jillian, and I was delving into the box. However, instead of yellow owl eyes, I met with the large, sable eyes of a beautiful common nighthawk.

Common nighthawks (*Chordeiles minor*) look like a curious cross between a small owl and a large, cryptically colored swift. The name is misleading, because they are neither hawks, nor strictly nocturnal. Rather, they are crepuscular hunters, foraging during dusk and dawn when flying insects are most plentiful. Nighthawks are exclusively aerial feeders; even water is usually consumed while in flight. For this reason, they are particularly challenging patients for wild-bird rehabilitators.

Nighthawks have enormous, shovel-like mouths hidden by fluffy facial feathers. With mouths closed, they appear to have tiny bills, but when they open wide to let out their high pitched *pe-ent*, the sudden appearance of this cavernous gape, accompanied by the shrill sound, can be a shock to the unsuspecting. The aforementioned, “aggressive” screeching actually turned out to be the plaintive cry of a timid and frightened bird. Nighthawks are unusually tame for wild birds; they have a gentle, docile demean-

or. In 1924, F. A. Patton wrote of the nighthawk: “...they are a quiet retiring bird, and I have known them on a hot day to let one approach close enough to strike them with a stick.” (I hope he didn’t actually go around hitting them with sticks!) Nevertheless, convalescing nighthawks should be treated with kid gloves—they are sensitive and highly vulnerable to stress. In addition, like nearly all wild birds, they benefit enormously from the companionship of their own kind.

My particular little patient had a bubble-like hump rising from her upper back that indicated a ruptured air sac or sacs. She was likely in shock, under tremendous stress, and feeling downright lousy. I whisked her home to my office/makeshift bird ICU.

The next day, the phone rang and again the caller conveyed a story about wrangling a smallish, unidentified bird away from a tiding of magpies. After that, it was just like the movie *Groundhog Day* around here. The same call, again and again: “Hello... yes, this is she...uh huh, sounds like a nighthawk...let me guess, magpies?”

From August 28 through September 10, I received eight nearly identical calls regarding nighthawks. What was going on? Despite the fact that nighthawks are particularly skilled aerialists, my bet was on car strikes. In the

For a wild bird, the nighthawk is unusually tame and can sometimes be approached closely.



evenings, the bright lights of vehicles would have both attracted and illuminated moths and other irresistible nighthawk delicacies. These inexperienced birds were diving in front of the cars, wholly focused on their quarry and unaware of the oncoming danger. Those that survived the impact sat stunned until daylight, when the raucous magpies discovered them. Ironically, without the magpie ruckus, the human interceders would probably not have spotted these well-disguised birds.

VICKIE ANDERSON

Nighthawks are difficult to see unless they are in flight. They are typically inactive during the

day, perching on fenceposts or roosting on the ground until dusk. They depend on their cryptic coloration—mottled shades of brown, gray, and black—for camouflage. One thick white bar on each wing is visible when the birds are in flight. The best way to spot a nighthawk is to “look” with your ears. On summer evenings, they can be heard flapping haphazardly and swooping over insect-laden fields or waterways. Males create a reverberating sound or booming with their wing feathers by plummeting toward the ground, then suddenly pulling up with their ultra-long, power-

ful wings. The white wing bar of the adult nighthawk is most visible during their erratic, bat-like flights; this atypical flight pattern, accompanied by the booming sound, has earned them the nickname “bullbats.”

The white wing bar also distinguishes the nighthawk from the common poorwill, which otherwise looks quite similar. Poorwills also lack the disproportionately long wings of the common nighthawk. Although nighthawks are relatively small birds (about 2.5 ounces), their wingspan can reach up to 24 inches. Juveniles may have either a very thin or no white wing bar at all. Adult male nighthawks have a discernible white throat patch and tail band. None of my patients had white throats or tail bands but all had significant wing bars, meaning, oddly enough, they were all adult (though I suspect young) females.

Interestingly, two of the individuals were noticeably lighter in color; they were still cryptically patterned but with white, pale grays, and silver. Initially, I didn't give it much thought: probably just a natural variant or perhaps they were partially leucistic. Later, thanks to The Wildlife Rehabilitation Center of Minnesota, I discovered that the light-colored nighthawks were likely a rare subspecies called Sennett's (*Chordeiles minor sennetti*.) Compared with other nighthawks, Sennett's

nighthawks have a slightly larger wingspan, no throat patch on males or females, and are lighter in color overall.

According to the *Bent Life History Series*, Sennett's nighthawks have historically been found in America's northern plain states: Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. In 1896, Dr. Louis B. Bishop wrote of the Sennett's: “The pale colors of the male protect him admirably, harmonizing with the dull gray of the fences and rocks, perched on which he passes the day....”

Because nighthawks migrate through Montana between August 20 and September 20, I was concerned that my feathered charges would not recover in time to complete their extensive migration. Nighthawks have one of the longest migrations of any North American bird, traveling over 6,500 miles between Canada and Argentina. Holding one of these downy-soft birds in my hand, I marveled to think that this diminutive creature would travel more than a quarter of the way around the globe and back, every year, for a lifespan of up to 10 years.

Of the eight female nighthawks in my care, one had a broken radius, two suffered from burst air sacs, and all were stunned and likely suffering from head and/or spinal trauma. They

The white wing bars of the adult common nighthawk are most visible during dusk hunting. Adult males have a white throat patch and a white tail band.

were all of average weight, ranging from 2.25 to 2.75 ounces, and looked otherwise healthy. I treated them for shock, pain, and trauma and dutifully tube fed them 3 to 5 ml. of “formula” (a combination of equal parts Nutrastart, kitten food, and hardboiled egg) followed by 10 to 12 crickets, twice each morning and twice each evening.

Thankfully, they recovered quickly and all (except Dragonheart, with her broken wing) were ready for release by September 18. Early that morning, I drove with my seven little graduates to the bank of the Gallatin River. A hatch of salmon flies buzzed thickly in the morning sky. I trudged through dense groundcover to a rocky clearing close to the water’s edge. There I opened the traveling case and looked in to see seven sets of glittering black eyes drinking in the sight of sudden liberation. They paused for a long moment, then, one by one, opened their



oversized wings and took flight. Most of them made one exploratory loop and then followed the river southward. I watched their strong, joyous aerobatics; I saw how they instinctively knew in which direction to go. A wave of intermingled relief, elation, and emptiness washed over me as I watched them shrink into the distance, tiny pilgrims whose short stay has left an indelible impression. ✎

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ILLUSTRATION BY BOB HINES