

A RECONSIDERATION OF SOME CAPRIMULGIDS ON TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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Introduction. The Caprimulgidae, including the sub-groups nighthawks and nightjars, are difficult birds to study, largely because they are nocturnal or, in some cases, crepuscular. In addition, their mottled, cryptically patterned plumage creates problems of identification for many observers, especially in dim light.

The six (or seven) species known to occur on Trinidad and/or Tobago (ffrench 1991) include some for which details of status and distribution are far from clear. In this paper I am outlining some of the problems, in the hope that future observers may succeed in unravelling them. Two species, the Pauraque *Nyctidromus albicollis* and the White-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus cayennensis* are comparatively well-known, the former having been the subject of recent papers in this journal (Quesnel 1985, 1989, 1993). I shall deal mainly with the other species.

1. Short-tailed Nighthawk *Lurocalis semitorquatus*.

This small nighthawk, formerly known as Semicollared Nighthawk or (erroneously) Nightjar, is widely distributed on Trinidad but cannot be called common. It is regularly seen over forest in the Arima valley at altitudes up to 450m, but also at sea-level in the Oropouche Lagoon, where I found small bands hawking at dusk over small rivers near mangroves. It is characterised by its small size, generally dark colour with whitish crescent-shaped markings on the secondaries and coverts, but *no pale bar on the primaries*, (which all other locally occurring nighthawks have). Another diagnostic feature is the short, square-ended tail, so that at rest its long wings protrude beyond the tail. In flight it is characterised by its erratic, bat-like movement above the trees or over water. I have never heard a song, though I have heard its flight call, a light, hissing *whick-whick* or *wee-it*. In Venezuela it has apparently been recorded calling a repeated *cu-ick* or *che-wit* (though these calls may possibly have come from a different species).

The status of this species in Trinidad is made uncertain by recent doubts over the only breeding record, that of Herklots (1961) at Aripo Savannah on 28 March 1954. An egg measuring 23.5 x 16.0 mm was being incubated on the ground, but Herklots, as usual, did not state whether or not he collected the adult (and in fact it seems he rarely preserved his specimens). Recently Seutin and Letzer (1995) found a nest of this species (subsp. *noctivagus*) in Panama. It was on a horizontal branch 6m up in an *Erythrina* tree, where the authors observed the development of a chick over several days. This nest location matched those of three other nests of

L. semitorquatus nattereri (which itself may be a separate, closely related species) in Argentina (Straneck *et al.* 1987). Pending further evidence, we should maintain an open mind on Herklots' record, but it seems likely that this species is an arboreal nester, and observers would do well to look for nests in trees.

In Venezuela Paul Schwartz (pers. comm.) reported that three different-sized *Lurocalis* nighthawks occurred in cloud forest at Rancho Grande. He considered them different subspecies, including the nominate race (which occurs on Trinidad), *schaeferi* and the southern migrant *nattereri* (occurring in July and August). A fourth, larger race *rufiventris* is found in the Venezuelan Andes. Seutin and Letzer (1995) remarked that known egg sizes of the above *Lurocalis* varied significantly, but pointed out that the egg found by Herklots was smaller than would be expected. If it was not a *Lurocalis* egg, it could only have come from *Caprimulgus cayennensis*, which is a common breeding resident in the Waller Field area.

L. semitorquatus has been observed in every month of the year on Trinidad, but it is certainly not clear whether the same race is involved all the time. Migrants from the south would be expected between May and October, and I would expect breeding (if any) to occur between February and June. Regular observations of this species in its known haunts should reveal any significant seasonal movements.

2. Common Nighthawk *Chordeiles minor*.

The only local record is that of Kirk from Tobago (1883), but his comment that it occurred "from July to October" prompts speculation that Kirk may have confused this northern migrant with its congener *C. acutipennis* (see below). Certainly the North American *C. minor* does migrate south into the Antillean islands (where I saw it on Barbados) and South America, so could be expected on Trinidad and Tobago. I have seen birds of this genus flying over Crown Point, but at the time was never able to identify it adequately. The most likely month for sightings is October, and the time during the last hour or so of daylight. Its close similarity to the slightly smaller *C. acutipennis* means that identification may well necessitate a bird in the hand.

3. Lesser Nighthawk *Chordeiles acutipennis*.

This is the species that is commonly seen in Trinidad during August to October, feeding high over the Caroni savannas and marshes during the last hour of daylight (unless some of these are *C. minor*!). At such a time one can see as many as fifty in

the sky at once, twisting and turning as they feed up to 30m above ground. After dark they can be seen along tracks and side-roads in the savannas, their eyes gleaming in the reflection of car head-lights. All specimens of *Chordeiles* so far collected on Trinidad and Tobago have been *acutipennis*. Discrimination of the two *Chordeiles* species should be reasonably easy in good conditions, but of course mostly they are seen in the last hours of daylight or after dark.

The nesting of *acutipennis* on Trinidad has been recorded only by Belcher and Smooker (1936), who found four nests from February to mid-May, a time when I personally have found the species scarce, to say the least. I wonder therefore if the nesting (and the eggs) attributed by these authors to this species may not have been those of *Caprimulgus cayennensis*, as suggested earlier for *Lurocalis*. It is perhaps significant that Smooker had spent quite a few years collecting on Trinidad without ever encountering *cayennensis*; he eventually found out from Roberts (1934) that it was resident. The eggs and nests of the two species are very similar.

If I am wrong in my suspicions, then we should regard *C. acutipennis* as a rare resident. In that case, why does one never hear its call? This might be described as a churring trill lasting about 10 seconds and often repeated. It must be admitted that such a sound at night in marsh or savannah country might be interpreted as coming from an amphibian; but the songs of the various species of frogs and toads in Trinidad have been intensively studied (e.g. Kenny 1969, 1971), so that any similar song coming from a nightjar would almost certainly have been noticed. I am therefore inclined to believe that *C. acutipennis* is a common, regular migrant to Trinidad (and less common on Tobago), but is unlikely to be a resident at all.

4. *Nacunda* Nighthawk *Podager nacunda*.

The status of this considerably larger nighthawk is similar to that of the previous species but different! Like *C. acutipennis* it is most commonly found between June and October, and rarely at other times. Belcher and Smooker (1936) recorded three nests with eggs in Caroni marshes during April. In this case the large size of the eggs precludes any mistake. But again there are few sightings of this species except during the period when most south temperate migrants move to the north of the continent.

The smaller race of this species, *minor*, breeds in the northern part of South America, so one assumes that Smooker's observations of breeding birds refer to this race. Certainly most of the collected specimens are small enough, although two birds have wing chords measuring 236 and 238 mm, large enough to fit the migratory nominate race. The latter is known to reach Venezuela from late May (Friedmann and Smith 1950). There are no specimens available from Tobago, and to my knowledge no records from this century, but Kirk (1883) claimed to have collected two in September and October; it seems unlikely that he was mistaken in the identity of this strikingly large nighthawk.

One solution to the puzzle as to why Smooker found these

two nighthawks nesting, but no-one else has, could be ecological changes - drainage, agricultural and economic development - that have occurred in the Caroni marshes over six or seven decades. But large numbers of both species still occur during the migratory period, when we should expect that most birds visiting Trinidad (or Tobago) from South America would be southern breeders. On balance I believe that both these nighthawks are non-breeding visitors.

5. *Rufous* Nightjar *Caprimulgus rufus*.

One of the mysteries about this large nightjar is that it has so rarely been seen. Yet it seems to be not uncommon in its habitat of deciduous scrub and light woodland in NW Trinidad. During 1965 - 1969 on a number of overnight visits to the Bocas Islands I heard many calling birds between April and June, and the species has been heard in the Northern Range foothills as far east as St Augustine. Yet no calls are heard outside the breeding season, and the species is certainly difficult to find when it is not calling. In spite of considerable efforts (even including attempts at mist-netting) we never actually located a single Rufous Nightjar on those Bocas visits, and no specimen has ever been collected there.

Belcher and Smooker (1936) recorded four nests (February to May), and one bird was actually seen. There is indeed no mistaking the breeding song of the species, which resembles that of its congener the Chuck-wills-widow, but can safely be separated from that species. David Rooks (pers. comm.) claimed to have found this species nesting on Tobago, identifying it only by its plumage. He did not "notice" any call, and I believe that confirmation can only follow if this diagnostic feature can be safely identified.

Identification of *Caprimulgids*.

It is a common feature amongst birds of cryptic plumage (e.g. nightjars, some antbirds and flycatchers) that they communicate with each other quite effectively in conditions of thick undergrowth or in darkness, largely by distinctive call-notes, rather than by distinctions of plumage. Human observers of these groups of birds might do well to emulate the birds themselves, and rely for secure identification on satisfactory understanding and appreciation of their songs or calls. Of the three commonly breeding species of caprimulgids on Trinidad and Tobago, all the calls are quite distinct, even with their slight variations.

Although Victor Quesnel (1993) has distinguished up to seven separate "calls" for the Pauraque *Nyctidromus albicollis*, by far the commonest is the far-carrying whistle, resembling *wee-oo*, which may be preceded by one or two preliminary notes that are occasionally added. Its other calls are mostly similar.

The White-tailed Nightjar *Caprimulgus cayennensis* found on both islands, mainly calls an extremely high-pitched double note - *chi-peeer*, quite unlike the lower-pitched song of *Nyctidromus*. But both these species make a whistling call.

The Rufous Nightjar *C. rufus* has a completely different breeding call from the above two species, being a rhythmical,

but not at all musical, series of four or five notes, *chuck-wit-wit-wee-oo*, repeated every few seconds. I would never describe this sound as a whistle, and I cannot understand Belcher's description of it (1936) as a "characteristic hiss". Once heard, it can hardly be forgotten, for during the breeding season males seem to call constantly through the hours of darkness.

Note. Most nightjar species also use their wings in courtship to create a drumming or whirring sound, quite separately from their calls.

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