
NATURE NOTE

Changes in the Number of Lesser Nighthawks at Caroni Sanctuary Car Park

On the night of 11 August, 1989 on the way home to Talparo from Port of Spain, I decided to pass through the parking lot of the Caroni Sanctuary to look for nighthawks. On that night, two days after first quarter, I saw four or five of them, and encouraged by this observation, passed in again on 12 August and 18 August (one day after full moon), saw three of them on the second visit and two on the third. They all seemed to be the same species, and after careful scrutiny and checking of descriptions and illustrations, I came to the conclusion that the species was the Lesser Nighthawk, *Chordeiles acutipennis*. Over the next five years I made it a habit to return home via the Caroni Savannah Road once per month at or near full moon, and on the way simply drive slowly through the carpark in the same circular route looking for these birds. The time of visit varied from about 2000 h to 2300 h, though I did not always take note of it; but the carpark was always vacant, so disturbance is not a factor to be considered. From December to July I saw no nighthawks. For August to November the results are in the table below. I visited the area three times in August 1989 and saw 9–10 birds. I have entered three in the table as the average for one visit.

Table. Number of birds sitting on the carpark.

Month	Year				
	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993
Aug.	3		0		
Sept	2	4	1	1	0
Oct	1	1	0	0	0
Nov	0	1	0	0	0

Belcher and Smooker (1936) noted that “its present status in Trinidad is that of a rare resident”, and a little later “as in Leotaud’s day [1866], in the off season it haunts at dusk the wet savannahs in little flocks of five or six”. ffrench (1991) calls it “a common species, especially in August to October, occurring on savannahsbreeding but probably also migrant.” Later, however (1997), ffrench expressed doubts about the breeding reports, and suggested that the species visits Trinidad (and Tobago) only as a migrant.

Presumably then, what I saw at the Caroni Sanctuary in 1989–1990 were “little flocks”. But why did they disappear by 1993? Are these observations evidence for a decline in numbers in recent years, or for migration, or for a change of habits? Perhaps the observations support the conclusion made by ffrench (1997) that the species is a migrant and not a rare resident, but further observations are needed to warrant definite conclusions.

REFERENCES

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