

Nighthawks By Susan Heath

During the late spring and summer you may have noticed a bird flying around at dawn and dusk catching insects in the air. If it had long tapered wings with a white stripe across them near the end, you've got yourself a nighthawk sighting. We have two kinds of nighthawks in Texas, the Common Nighthawk and the Lesser Nighthawk.

Common Nighthawks range throughout Texas and in fact throughout most of the U.S. and the southern half of Canada. Lesser Nighthawks are found in the southern and western parts of our state and also in the southern parts of New Mexico, Arizona and California. Telling these two species apart can be a chore and takes practice.



A Common Nighthawk rests during the day. These birds tend to be active only at night. Photo by Susan Heath.

The white stripe on the wing of a Common Nighthawk is farther up on the wing than it is on Lesser Nighthawks. Plus, the wing tips of a Common Nighthawk are more pointed than those of the Lesser. But those things are pretty subjective, and unless you have one of each side by side, it can be a tough call.

Common Nighthawks are often detected when their buzzy call that sounds like "peent" is heard. This call is called "booming" and is part of their breeding ritual. A quick check of the sky will probably reveal this aerial hunter looping around in circles as if floating on the air. They are very graceful in flight and give the effect of a butterfly or moth in flight. Lesser Nighthawks, on the other hand, are mostly silent when flying. This can be a great way to tell the two Nighthawk species apart.

These birds are called nighthawks because they are active mostly at night. During the day, they sleep perched on a branch, a fencepost, or even the ground. They are quite camouflaged and can be difficult to see when perched. They do fly during the day sometimes, though, so you might get lucky and see one in the light.

Nighthawks do not make a nest but rather lay their eggs directly on the ground in a variety of habitats including woods, beaches and gravel rooftops. They typically lay two eggs which are incubated for about 18 days by the female. Similar to the way Killdeer will fake a broken wing to lead predators away from the nest, nighthawks will do the same. This is called a "broken wing" display. Both parents feed the chicks, which will fledge in 25 to 30 days.

Both species of Nighthawk are migratory and use a migration strategy known as circum-Gulf. That means they fly around the Gulf of Mexico rather than across it (that's trans-Gulf). Common Nighthawks spend the winter in South America while Lesser Nighthawks spend the winter from Mexico south to Costa Rica and Panama. These ranges are poorly known, though, because of the difficulty in telling the species apart.

Nighthawks started arriving along the Texas coast in April and they will be present through the summer. So next time you're out at dawn or dusk, take a look up and see if you can spot one.