

## Nighthawks – Sky Hunters of the Night

By Martin Hagne

In late spring and summer, you may have noticed a slim brown bird flying around erratically at dawn and dusk, catching insects. If it had long slender tapered wings with a thin white stripe across the wingtip, you may have witnessed the feeding flight of a nighthawk.

There are two species of nighthawks found on the Texas coast. The Common Nighthawk ranges 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.

Identifying them to species while in flight (or perched for that matter) can be rather hard, even for a seasoned birder. The white stripe of the Common Nighthawk is located farther up the wing than it is on the Lesser Nighthawk, who's white wingbar seems closer to the tip. Also, the wing tips of a Common Nighthawk are more pointed, while the wing tips of the Lesser Nighthawk seem rounded. The Common is slightly larger, and tends to fly less erratically, often feeding higher up in the sky than Lesser. But, as with many things in nature, those distinctions can be pretty subjective. Unless you have one of each side by side, or a lot of close-up experience, it can be really hard to tell the difference between the two.

Common Nighthawks are often detected by their buzzy call that sounds like "peent". Looking up in the open sky might reveal this aerial acrobat as its floating on the air, often with just a few shallow wingbeats. 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, and their flight might more resemble a bat.

These birds are called nighthawks because they are active mostly only at dusk and into the 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 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. Both parents feed the chicks which will fledge in 25 to 30 days.

Both species are migratory and use a migration strategy known as circum-Gulf. That means they fly around the Gulf of Mexico rather than across it (a strategy known as trans-Gulf). Common Nighthawks spend the winter in South America, while Lesser Nighthawks spend the winter from Mexico south to Costa Rica and Panama. Nighthawks are just beginning to arrive along the Texas coast, so next time you're out at dawn or dusk, take a look up and see if you can spot one!