

Status and Occurrence of Lesser Nighthawk (*Chordeiles acutipennis*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin. Submitted: April 15, 2017.

Introduction and Distribution

The Lesser Nighthawk (*Chordeiles acutipennis*) is a small species of goatsucker found breeding in California from the Owens Valley (Mono and Inyo counties), south through the Mojave and Colorado deserts, and Salton Sea area of the southeast, west to the Antelope Valley of Los Angeles County, north throughout the entire Central Valley, in the Cholame area of Monterey County, and locally through the southern coastal zone of the state (Garrett and Dunn 1981, Unitt 1984b, Small 1994). The Lesser Nighthawk is also found in the southern Nevadan desert valleys north to Overton in Clark County (Gullion *et al.* 1959, Ryser 1985). This species is also found throughout the lower Virgin River valley of extreme south-western Utah (Wauer 1969, Behle *et al.* 1985). The breeding range of the Lesser Nighthawk also includes most of south and western Arizona at elevations below 1500 m, including much of Yuma County, north to the Hualapai Valley, in the lower Grand Canyon region, and in the Virgin River area near Littlefield (Phillips *et al.* 1964a, Monson and Phillips 1964, Wise-Gervais 2005). The range of this species also extends into the southern lowlands of New Mexico north to Grant, Socorro, Otero, Chaves, and Lea counties (Hubbard 1978c). In Texas, the Lesser Nighthawk is found breeding from El Paso County in the west, to the central Gulf coast in the east, south through the Trans-Pecos, and especially the lower Rio Grande valley and north perhaps as far as Big Spring and Waco (Latta 2006, Latta and Baltz 2012). There are recent summer records in south-western Colorado that suggest there is the possibility of breeding (Dexter 2011).

The Lesser Nighthawk also breeds throughout much of northern Mexico, including most of Baja, but exact distribution remains poorly understood (Howell and Webb 2010). Mostly absent from the Atlantic slope south of Veracruz, but present on the northern Yucatán Peninsula, and from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico, south to central Honduras, and is present mainly in interior (Howell and Webb 2010). In Central America, south of this area, this species has been recorded breeding at Tipitapa, Nicaragua; Rio Lempa and Arcos del Espino, El Salvador (Komar and Rodriguez 1997); and presumed to breed locally along the Pacific slope of Costa Rica (Stiles and Skutch 1989) and Panama (Ridgely and Gwynne 1989).

In South America, the Lesser Nighthawk breeds from Colombia in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and Huila (Hilty and Brown 1986). In Venezuela, this species occurs almost throughout the entire country up to the 1200 m elevation mark, including Margarita Island and Cayos Sal and Arriba (De Schauensee and Phelps 1978, Hilty 2003). In Guyana, the Lesser Nighthawk is found in Georgetown and coastal rivers from Ituribisi to New Amsterdam (Snyder 1966). This species has also been found in Trinidad and Tobago (French 1991a), south to Brazil in São

Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and in both eastern, and southern, and west-central regions of the country (Sick 1993). It has rarely been record in Paraguay (Hyde 1995), and west to coastal Peru and the dry Marañón Valley up to 950 m in elevation (Johnson and Goodall 1965, Schulenberg *et al.* 2010).

There are 7 recognized subspecies of Lesser Nighthawk found throughout the species' range (Latta and Baltz 2012). The Lesser Nighthawks that breed in North America are of the subspecies (*Chordeiles acutipennis texensis*). Most of the Lesser Nighthawks found in the United States are migratory, wintering from Mexico, in the central Baja Peninsula, south Sonora, Guanajuato, and Veracruz; south to at least Costa Rica, where they are found locally in the Pacific lowlands, and sporadically elsewhere (Stiles and Skutch 1989). The Lesser Nighthawk also winters in Panama on both the Pacific and Caribbean slopes and into lower highlands (Ridgely and Gwynne 1989). The Lesser Nighthawk is reported as a rare winter visitor to Florida (Robertson and Woolfenden 1992a, Stevenson and Anderson 1994b), Louisiana (Lowery 1981), Texas (Oberholser 1974), southern California (Garrett and Dunn 1981), southern Arizona (Monson and Phillips 1964), and the lower Colorado River valley of southern Arizona and southern California, where it has been recorded more frequently during mild winters (Rosenberg *et al.* 1991).

Other populations breeding in central and South America are suspected of being non-migratory (Oberholser 1914a, Bent 1940a, Sick 1993).

The Lesser Nighthawk is a casual or accidental vagrant during migration, mostly in April and May in Colorado (Janos and Prather 1989, Dexter 2011), with vagrants being recorded in Oklahoma (Davis 1962c), New Jersey (O'Brien 2008) and Ontario (Goodwin 1974, Wormington 2002), South Carolina (Latta and Baltz 2012), West Virginia (Latta and Baltz 2012), as well as Louisiana (Lowery 1981), Alabama, and one record during the winter in Bermuda (American Ornithologists' Union 1983).

Along the west coast north of California, the Lesser Nighthawk is an accidental vagrant with 2 accepted records for Oregon by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OBO 2016). There are currently no records for Washington State (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WRBC 2016) or Idaho (IBRC 2016). The Lesser Nighthawk is an accidental vagrant to British Columbia where there are 4 records (Toochin *et al.* 2014). Incredibly, this species has occurred once in Alaska with a bird found dead at the Noatak River mouth, on August 16, 1985 (Gibson and Kessel 1992) and a bird was photographed at point blank range at Whitehorse, in the Yukon, on October 25, 2010 (Eckert 2011).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Lesser Nighthawk is tricky and requires great attention to detail due to its similarity to the Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*) which breeds across British Columbia (Campbell *et al.* 1990b). The Lesser Nighthawk is a slender, small to medium-sized goatsucker that measures 22 cm in length, with wingspan of 55.88 cm and weighs 50 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). All plumages of the Lesser Nighthawk are cryptic, rendering birds remarkably inconspicuous when perched on the ground (Latta and Baltz 2012). The upper-parts of the adult male are gray brown, mottled with buff, brown, and blackish (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The throat has a prominent white, V-shaped patch (Latta and Baltz 2012). The chest is mottled dark gray and brown and the under-parts are buff, with dusky, dark brown barring (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The tail is slightly notched, with a blackish tip, with sandy barring, and a sub-terminal white band (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The wings are slender, rounded, less pointed (Godfrey 1986), with a white patch across distal portion of outer 4 primaries that is conspicuous during flight (Latta and Baltz 2012). The wing coverts are mottled gray brown (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The adult female is similar to the adult male, but smaller, and lacks a sub-terminal tail-band and has a smaller, buffy white wing-patch (Latta and Baltz 2012). Juvenile birds are similar to adult female birds, but the upper-parts are overall paler with, especially in males, a smaller wing-patch and tail band (Latta and Baltz 2012). The juvenile female lacks a tail-band and has a smaller buffy wing-patch (Latta and Baltz 2012). There is no seasonal plumage change (Latta and Baltz 2012).

The Lesser Nighthawk is extremely similar in appearance to the widely distributed Common Nighthawk and in British Columbia; this is the only species any observer will have to contend with for identification. The Common Nighthawk is larger than a Lesser Nighthawk and measures 24 cm in length, with a wingspan of 60.96 cm, and weighs 62 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Common Nighthawk is distinguished from Lesser Nighthawk by several subtle, but critical characteristics (Ridgway 1914b, Garrett and Dunn 1982, Zimmer 1985). On Common Nighthawk, the white wing-patch is located more distally on the wings, which is approximately two-thirds of the way to the wing-tip on the Lesser Nighthawk (Latta and Baltz 2012). The white patch tapers toward the rear in Lesser Nighthawk, but may broaden slightly toward the rear on the Common Nighthawk (Latta and Baltz 2012). The wing-patch is usually white on the Lesser Nighthawk, but often buffy and less distinctive in females and may be lacking altogether in some immatures (Latta and Baltz 2012). The outermost primary feather, or P10 feather, of the Lesser Nighthawk is shorter than P9, resulting in a wing that appears more rounded than that of the Common Nighthawk (Latta and Baltz 2012). As seen from below in flight, the Lesser Nighthawk has more obvious buff-coloured barring on the flight feathers,

compared to the usually plain dusky remiges of the Common Nighthawk (Latta and Baltz 2012). The background colour of the under-parts is buff on the Lesser Nighthawk (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The foraging flight of the Lesser Nighthawk is lower, much closer to the ground and more erratic than that of the Common Nighthawk (Latta and Baltz 2012). The Common Nighthawk often flies much higher in the sky, and executes long steep dives, which the Lesser Nighthawk doesn't do in flight (Godfrey 1986). The Lesser Nighthawk has much shallower wing beats (Latta and Baltz 2012) and doesn't produce the characteristic booming noise in flight of the Common Nighthawk (Godfrey 1986).

Although the two species may be distinguished in the field on the basis of the above plumage and behavioural differences, these differences are often slight and identification based on them may be difficult without experience (Latta and Baltz 2012). However, the two species are easily distinguished by their vocalizations (Latta and Baltz 2012). The calls of the Lesser Nighthawk are a low "purr", "whinnying" or "trill", never the nasal "peent" calls of the Common Nighthawk (Godfrey 1986, Latta and Baltz 2012).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Lesser Nighthawk is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia with 4 provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The first Provincial record of the Lesser Nighthawk was documented and photographed by Mike Yip aboard a ship 50 miles offshore from Tofino on June 5, 2006 (Toochin *et al.* 2014). Although at first thought by some to be a very lost Common Nighthawk, keen observers noted it was a Lesser Nighthawk, after the photographs were posted to web chat groups, highlighting the subtle differences between the 2 species. The second record for British Columbia was a bird found freshly dead, but well photographed, by Ilya Povalyaev and Peter Candido, at Iona Island in Richmond on June 30, 2006 (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The third record for British Columbia was an adult found and photographed by Jeremy Gatten and Jeremy Kimm at Whiffin Spit, in Sooke on May 28, 2011 (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The fourth and most recent provincial record was found by Rick Toochin along the Cole Road dyke trail in Sumas Prairie, in Abbotsford, on May 6, 2016 (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.). Though there are only a handful of records for British Columbia, the pattern that is emerging so far is that the Lesser Nighthawk is a Spring and Summer overshoot with May and June the months keen observers should be on the lookout for this potential vagrant. This species can turn up anywhere in the Province and out of season Nighthawks should be given careful scrutiny and attention when encountered. It is very likely this species will occur again the future.



Figures 1 & 2: Record #1: Lesser Nighthawk 50 miles offshore from Tofino on June 5, 2006.
Photo © Mike Yip.



Figures 3 & 4: Record #2: Lesser Nighthawk (freshly dead) at Iona Island, Richmond on June 30, 2006.
Photo © Peter Candido.



Figures 5 & 6: Record #3: Lesser Nighthawk at Whiffin Spit, Sooke on May 28, 2011.
Photo © Jeremy Gatten.

Table 1: Records of Lesser Nighthawk for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult June 5, 2006: Mike Yip (photo) 50 miles offshore from Tofino (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 2.(1) adult June 30, 2006: Ilya Povalyaev, Peter Candido (photo: specimen) Iona Island, Richmond (Cecile 2006d, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 3.(1) adult May 28, 2011: Jeremy Gatten, Jeremy Kimm (photo) Whiffin Spit, Sooke (Charlesworth 2011c, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 4.(1) adult May 6, 2016: Rick Toochin: Cole Road, Sumas Prairie, Abbotsford (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.)

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