

SPOTTED-TAILED NIGHTJAR NESTING IN VERACRUZ, MEXICO

By DALE A. ZIMMERMAN

The Spotted-tailed Nightjar or Whip-poor-will (*Caprimulgus maculicaudus*) was first reported from México by Blake (1949a) on the basis of ten specimens collected between January 1 and April 2, 1941, near Tutla, Oaxaca, at an elevation of about 4850 feet. Alvarez del Toro (1952:113) next collected one at Ocozocoautla, Chiapas (elevation 3305 feet), on April 24, 1949. Blake (1949b:211) wrote that "available records indicate that the species is relatively sedentary." However, he later (1953:233) referred to it in his field guide as "apparently a winter visitant from South America." In 1953, Davis and Morony (1953:360) found these nightjars "common on all the prairies of extreme southern Veracruz which we were able to visit during April" (the birds were common on the prairie south of Las Choapas on the night of May 3 which was the last day the observers were in the region). The elevation of the area was given as 100 feet.

On April 26, 1956, Marian Zimmerman and I went with L. Irby Davis to Las Choapas where we camped out on the "prairie," more properly termed a savanna, at the edge of a dense thicket (fig. 1). About 7:00 p.m., just after sundown, we heard a high-pitched, passerine-like *pit sweet* which Davis said was the voice of the nightjar. I soon saw the bird, a male, perched crossways on a large fallen tree at the edge of the thicket. Before long, at least four more were calling near us—from the trail, where we could walk to within six feet of them as they sang; from the spindly low shrubs in the grassy areas; and from the air not far above us. If approached too closely they fluttered away, just



Fig. 1. Savanna near Las Choapas, Veracruz, where several Spotted-tailed Nightjars were seen on April 26, 1956.

beyond effective reach of my flashlight beam, and settled down again in the road or other open place. When one flushed, it jumped lightly off the ground, promptly began singing, and fluttered its wings very rapidly, each stroke not bringing them above the horizontal. The bird progressed slowly, wavering from side to side at times like a large moth. The tail was widespread much of the time, revealing the distinctive white markings. We identified no females.

At another campsite the following night we found three singing individuals. On April 28 we left for Yucatán and did not visit these localities again. However, upon returning to Veracruz, Mrs. Zimmerman and I investigated a similar area 30 miles southeast of Coatzacoalcos at 250 feet elevation. On May 20 we flushed a female Spotted-tailed Nightjar from the fresh green grass on a recently burned portion of the savanna. The bird flew silently and swiftly a few inches above the ground and dropped into a sparse thicket 100 feet away. She remained there on the bare soil, facing us. When we approached to within ten or 12 feet she flew farther away and out of sight over a low hill. Examination of the spot from which the bird had first flushed disclosed a newly-hatched chick, two halves of an egg shell and, about 12 inches away, an entire egg. There was no suggestion of a nest. The site (fig. 2) was an open one; a low, nearly leafless bush afforded slight cover.

We did not see the adult again until we returned that evening and collected her (fig. 3), the chick, and the egg which proved to be infertile. To my knowledge, these represent the first specimens of this bird from Veracruz and the first breeding record north of South America. The adult female weighed 34.0 grams. The irides were brown, the bill brownish-dusky, the feet purplish-gray.

The downy young (unsexed) weighed 6.3 grams; irides brown; bill dusky; feet purplish. It differs greatly from the uniformly tawny or buff-colored downy young of the Common Whip-poor-will (*Caprimulgus vociferus*) or Chuck-will's-widow (*C. carolinensis*), being blackish above with sparse, very pale brownish-buff markings. Below, it is light dusky marked with buffy-brown, except on the belly which is plain, pale buffy-brown.

The egg measures 16.6 by 26.1 mm., and it is pale buffy-ivory in color, with fine flecks of light purplish-brown and very pale lilac. The markings are somewhat more numerous about the larger end.

On the night of May 20-21, two nightjars sang a few songs at dusk and at intervals until 2:00 a.m., but we did not see them. The singing was decidedly less frequent and less emphatic than it had been in April. The usual call was a very high pitched, loud *pit-sweet* or *spit-sweet*; sometimes it was almost a tri-syllabic *pit-swéer*. On the evening of April 27, one bird began calling at 7:00. It repeated *pit-sweet* between 200 and 300 times in 40 minutes and then was silent until 8:45 p.m. It then sang continuously for an hour, and thereafter intermittently until at least 1:00 a.m. I awoke at 3:10 and heard a few calls at that time.

Another note, apparently given only in flight, is a short, extremely thin *seeet*, far higher pitched than the *pit-sweet* call. Probably it can be heard by human ears only at very close range. This *seeet* is sometimes (always?) accompanied by three quick, dull sounds that I described as *prrt-prrt-prrt*. I think these are produced by the wings, for they coincide perfectly with the *seeet* and do not seem vocal.

When we saw nightjars in the air, they were not more than 25 or 30 feet above ground. The sound of their voices after dark indicated that they seldom flew higher than that, and usually much lower.

The savannas on which *C. maculicaudus* occurs are rather extensive grassy areas studded with scattered low trees, numerous thickets of dense shrubbery, tangles of vines,



Fig. 2. Nest site of Spotted-tailed Nightjar, at base of low bush directly in front of observer, 30 miles southeast of Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, May 20, 1956.

and medium-sized trees. Although they may extend for several miles, they are interrupted by strips of rain forest and are more or less enclosed by woodland on all sides (fig. 1). Among the typical breeding birds are Plain-breasted Ground Doves (*Columbigallina minuta*), Ground-chats (*Chamaethlypis poliocephala*), Eastern Meadowlarks (*Sturnella magna*), Grasshopper Sparrows (*Ammodramus savannarum*), and Petén Sparrow (*Aimophila petenica*). Nocturnal species seemed especially numerous. On the night of April 26–27, I noted the following: Great Tinamou (*Tinamus major*), Boucard Tinamou (*Crypturellus boucardi*), Mexican Thick-knee (*Burhinus bistriatus*), Ferruginous Pygmy Owl (*Glaucidium brasilianum*), Squamulated Wood Owl (*Ciccaba virgata*), Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*), and Pauraque (*Nyctidromus albicollis*).

The Spotted-tailed Nightjar will undoubtedly be reported from other parts of México when there is further field work in crepuscular hours. Among the most likely places, I think, are the savannas in southern Tabasco and northern Chiapas. These are practically a continuation of those in southern Veracruz, as may be seen when travelling by train from Veracruz to Campeche. Certain areas near Palenque, Chiapas, look especially favorable. It would be interesting to know if the species breeds at Ocozocoaulta, as the April 24 date suggests, and at Tutla, localities that are 3000 to 4600 feet higher than the Veracruz savannas, and whether or not it occurs northwest of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

The voice and habits of adults and the pattern of the downy young suggest that *C. maculicaudus* is not very closely related to *C. carolinensis* and *C. vociferus*. Its rufous nuchal collar may or may not be indicative of close relationship with the little-known Ridgway Nightjar (*C. ridgwayi*) and Salvin Nightjar (*C. salvini*), whose downy young are not known to me. These two species are fairly common in readily accessible parts of México and are deserving of careful study. *Ridgwayi*, at least, sounds very unlike *maculicaudus*, but its strange voice is in no way similar to that of *C. vociferus* or *C.*

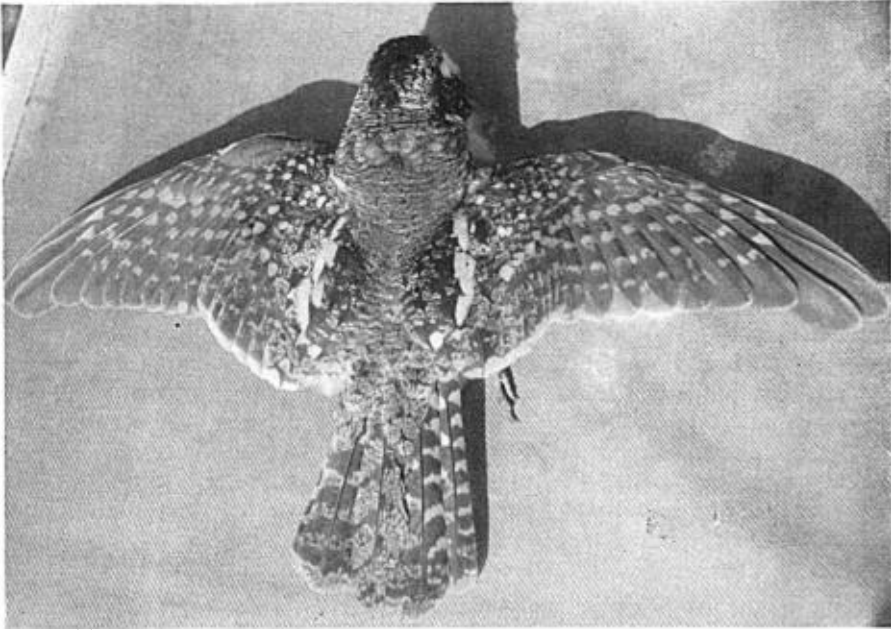


Fig. 3. Adult female Spotted-tailed Nightjar. Conspicuous white tail spots are present in the males only.

carolinensis. Several years ago I heard what may have been *C. salvini* near Victoria, Tamaulipas, but my recollection of it is not clear. The description of its voice given by Sutton and Pettingill (1942:17) suggests that it sings quite differently from either *maculicaudus* or *ridgwayi*.

LITERATURE CITED

- Alvarez del Toro, M.
 1952. New records of birds from Chiapas, Mexico. *Condor*, 54:112-114.
- Blake, E. R.
 1949a. First Mexican records of tropical American birds. *Nat. Hist. Misc. No. 42*.
 1949b. Distribution and variation of *Caprimulgus maculicaudus*. *Fieldiana: Zoology*, 31:207-213.
 1953. *Birds of Mexico* (University of Chicago Press).
- Davis, L. I., and Morony, J., Jr.
 1953. Tropical prairie. [Breeding bird census, southern Veracruz.] *Audubon Field Notes*, 7:359-360.
- Sutton, G. M., and Pettingill, O. S., Jr.
 1942. Birds of the Gomez Farias Region, southwestern Tamaulipas. *Auk*, 59:1-34.
- University of Michigan Museum of Zoology, Ann Arbor, Michigan, August 30, 1956.*