

CHUCK-WILL'S-WIDOW.

+CAPRIMULGUS CAROLINENSIS, *Gmel.*

PLATE XLI.—MALE AND FEMALE.

Our Goatsuckers, although possessed of great power of wing, are particularly attached to certain districts and localities. The species now under consideration is seldom observed beyond the limits of the Choctaw Nation in the State of Mississippi, or the Carolinas, on the shores of the Atlantic, and may with propriety be looked upon as the southern species of the United States. Louisiana, Florida, the lower portions of Alabama and Georgia, are the parts in which it most abounds; and there it makes its appearance early in spring, coming over from Mexico, and probably still warmer climates.

About the middle of March, the forests of Louisiana are heard to echo with the well-known notes of this interesting bird. No sooner has the sun disappeared, and the nocturnal insects emerged from their burrows, than the sounds, "*chuck-will's-widow*," repeated with great clearness and power six or seven times in as many seconds, strike the ear, bringing to the mind a pleasure mingled with a certain degree of melancholy, which I have often found very soothing. The sounds of the Goatsucker, at all events, forebode a peaceful and calm night, and I have more than once thought, are conducive to lull the listener to repose.

The deep ravines, shady swamps, and extensive pine ridges, are all equally resorted to by these birds; for in all such places they find ample means of providing for their safety during the day, and of procuring food under night. Their notes are seldom heard in cloudy weather, and never when it rains. Their roosting places are principally the hollows of decayed trees, whether standing or prostrate, which they seldom leave during the day, excepting while incubation is in progress. In these hollows I have found them, lodged in the company of several species of bats, the birds asleep on the mouldering particles of the wood, the bats clinging to the sides of the cavities. When surprised in such situations, instead of trying to effect their escape by flying out, they retire backwards to the farthest corners, ruffle all the feathers of their body, open their mouth to its full extent, and utter a hissing kind of murmur, not unlike that of some snakes. When seized and brought to the light of day, they open and close their eyes in rapid succession, as if it were painful for them to encounter so bright a light. They snap their little bill in the manner of Fly-catchers, and shuffle along as if extremely desirous of

making their escape. On giving them liberty to fly, I have found them able to proceed until out of my sight. They passed between the trees with apparently as much ease and dexterity as if it had been twilight. I once cut two of the quill-feathers of a wing of one of these birds, and allowed it to escape. A few days afterwards I found it in the same log, which induces me to believe that they, like many other birds, resort to the same spot, to roost or spend the day.

The flight of the Chuck-will's-widow is as light as that of its relative, the well-known *Whip-poor-will*, if not more so, and is more graceful as well as more elevated. It somewhat resembles the flight of the Hen-harrier, being performed by easy flappings of the wings, interspersed with sailings and curving sweeps, extremely pleasing to the bystander. At the approach of night, this bird begins to sing clearly and loudly, and continues its notes for about a quarter of an hour. At this time it is perched on a fence-stake, or on the decayed branch of a tree in the interior of the woods, seldom on the ground. The sounds or notes which it emits seem to cause it some trouble, as it raises and lowers its head in quick succession at each of them. This over, the bird launches into the air, and is seen sweeping over the cotton fields or the sugar plantations, cutting all sorts of figures, mounting, descending, or sailing, with so much ease and grace, that one might be induced to call it the *Fairy of the night*. If it passes close to one, a murmuring noise is heard, at times resembling that spoken of when the bird is caught by day. It suddenly checks its course, inclines to the right or left, secures a beetle or a moth, continues its flight over the field, passes and repasses hundreds of times over the same ground, and now and then alights on a fence-stake, or the tallest plant in the place, from which it emits its notes for a few moments with increased vivacity. Now, it is seen following a road or a path on the wing, and alighting here and there to pick up the beetle emerging from its retreat in the ground; again, it rises high in air, and gives chase to the insects that are flying there, perhaps on their passage from one wood to another. At other times, I have seen it poise itself on its wings opposite the trunk of a tree, and seize with its bill the insects crawling on the bark, in this manner inspecting the whole tree, with motions as light as those by which the Humming-Bird flutters from one flower to another. In this manner the Chuck-will's-widow spends the greater part of the night.

The greatest harmony appears to subsist between the birds of this species, for dozens may be observed flying together over a field, and chasing insects in all directions, without manifesting any enmity or envy. A few days after the arrival of the male birds, the females make their appearance, and the love season at once commences. The male pays his addresses to the female with a degree of pomposity only equalled by the Tame Pigeon. The



*Chuck-will's Widow,
(Harlequin Snake)*

female, perched lengthwise on a branch, appears coy and silent, whilst the male flies around her, alights in front of her, and with drooping wings and expanded tail advances quickly, singing with great impetuosity. They are soon seen to leave the branch together and gambol through the air. A few days after this, the female, having made choice of a place in one of the most retired parts of some thicket, deposits two eggs, which I think, although I cannot be certain, are all that she lays for the season. This bird forms no nest. A little space is carelessly scratched amongst the dead leaves, and in it the eggs, which are elliptical, dull olive, and speckled with brown, are dropped. These are not found without great difficulty, unless when by accident a person passes within a few feet of the bird whilst sitting, and it chances to fly off. Should you touch or handle these dear fruits of happy love, and, returning to the place, search for them again, you would search in vain; for the bird perceives at once that they have been meddled with, and both parents remove them to some other part of the woods, where chance only could enable you to find them again. In the same manner, they also remove the young when very small.

This singular occurrence has as much occupied my thoughts as the equally singular manner in which the *Cow Bunting* deposits her eggs, which she does, like the *Common Cuckoo* of Europe, one by one, in the nests of other birds, of different species from her own. I have spent much time in trying to ascertain in what manner the Chuck-will's-widow removes her eggs or young, particularly as I found, by the assistance of an excellent dog, that neither the eggs nor the young were to be met with within at least a hundred yards from the spot where they at first lay. The Negroes, some of whom pay a good deal of attention to the habits of birds and quadrupeds, assured me that these birds push the eggs or young with their bill along the ground. Some farmers, without troubling themselves much about the matter, imagine the transportation to be performed under the wings of the old bird. The removal is, however, performed thus:

When the Chuck-will's-widow, either male or female, (for each sits alternately,) has discovered that the eggs have been touched, it ruffles its feathers and appears extremely dejected for a minute or two, after which it emits a low murmuring cry, scarcely audible at a distance of more than eighteen or twenty yards. At this time the other parent reaches the spot, flying so low over the ground that I thought its little feet must have touched it, as it skimmed along, and after a few low notes and some gesticulations, all indicative of great distress, takes an egg in its large mouth, the other bird doing the same, when they would fly off together, skimming closely over the ground, until they disappeared among the branches and trees. But to what distance they remove their eggs, I have never been able to ascertain; nor

have I ever had an opportunity of witnessing the removal of the young. Should a person, coming upon the nest when the bird is sitting, refrain from touching the eggs, the bird returns to them and sits as before. This fact I have also ascertained by observation.

I have not been able to discover the peculiar use of the *pectinated claw* which this bird has on each foot.

The Chuck-will's-widow manifests a strong antipathy towards all snakes, however harmless they may be. Although these birds cannot in any way injure the snakes, they alight near them on all occasions, and try to frighten them away, by opening their prodigious mouth, and emitting a strong hissing murmur. It was after witnessing one of these occurrences, which took place at early twilight, that the idea of representing these birds in such an occupation struck me. The beautiful little snake, gliding along the dead branch, between two Chuck-will's-widows, a male and a female, is commonly called the *Harlequin Snake*, and is, I believe, quite harmless.

The food of the bird now under consideration consists entirely of all sorts of insects, among which the larger species of moths and beetles are very conspicuous. The long bristly feathers at the base of the mandibles of these birds no doubt contribute greatly to prevent the insects from escaping, after any portion of them has entered the mouth of the bird.

These birds become silent as soon as the young are hatched, but are heard again before their departure towards the end of summer. At this season, however, their cry is much less frequently heard than in spring. They leave the United States all of a sudden, about the middle of the month of August.

The occurrence of the remains of a bird in the stomach of an individual of this species is a very remarkable circumstance, as it had never been known, or even conjectured to feed on birds. If the larger and stronger species, and especially the Stout-billed Podargi, should thus be found to be carnivorous, their affinity to the Owls, so apparent in the texture and colours of their plumage, will be rendered more conspicuous.

CHUCK-WILL'S-WIDOW, *Caprimulgus Carolinensis*, Wils. Amer. Orn., vol. vi. p. 95.

CAPRIMULGUS CAROLINENSIS, Bonap. Syn., p. 61.

CHUCK-WILL'S-WIDOW, *Caprimulgus Carolinensis*, vol. i. p. 612.

CHUCK-WILL'S-WIDOW, *Caprimulgus Carolinensis*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. i. p. 273; vol. v. p. 401.

Bristles with lateral filaments; tail slightly rounded. Head and back dark brown, minutely mottled with yellowish-red, and longitudinally streaked with black; three bands of the latter colour, from the lower mandible diverg-

ing along the head; a yellowish-white line over the eye; wings barred with yellowish-red and brownish-black, and minutely sprinkled with the latter colour, as are the wing-coverts, which, together with the scapulars, are largely spotted with black, and tinged with grey; tail similarly barred and dotted; terminal half of the inner webs of the three outer feathers white, their extremities light red; lower parts dull reddish-yellow, sprinkled with dusky; a band of whitish feathers barred with black on the fore neck. Female like the male, but without white on the tail.

Male, $12\frac{3}{4}$, 26. Female, $13\frac{1}{4}$, 30.

W H I P - P O O R - W I L L .

†CAPRIMULGUS VOCIFERUS, *Wils.*

PLATE XLII.—MALE AND FEMALE.

This bird makes its appearance in most parts of our Western and Southern Districts, at the approach of spring, but is never heard, and indeed scarcely ever occurs, in the State of Louisiana. The more barren and mountainous parts of the Union seem to suit it best. Accordingly, the open Barrens of Kentucky, and the country through which the Alleghany ridges pass, are more abundantly supplied with it than any other regions. Yet, wherever a small tract of country, thinly covered with timber, occurs in the Middle Districts, there the *Whip-poor-will* is heard during the spring and early autumn.

This species of Night-jar, like its relative the Chuck-will's-widow, is seldom seen during the day, unless when accidentally discovered in a state of repose, when, if startled, it rises and flies off, but only to such a distance as it considers necessary, in order to secure it from the farther intrusion of the disturber of its noon-day slumbers. Its flight is very low, light, swift, noiseless, and protracted, as the bird moves over the places which it inhabits, in pursuit of the moths, beetles and other insects, of which its food is composed. During the day, it sleeps on the ground, the lowest branches of small trees and bushes, or the fallen trunks of trees so abundantly dispersed through the woods. In such situations, you may approach within a few feet of it; and, should you observe it whilst asleep, and not make any noise sufficient to alarm it, will suffer you to pass quite near without taking flight, as it seems to sleep with great soundness, especially about the middle of the



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Audubon, John James. 1840. "Chuck Will's-Widow, *Caprimulgus carolinensis*, Gmel. [Pl. 41]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 1, 151–155. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319154>.

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