THE NIGHT-HAWK.

† CHORDEILES VIRGINIANUS, *Briss.*

PLATE XLIII.—MALE AND FEMALE.

The name of this bird disagrees with the most marked characteristics of its habits, for it may be seen, and has frequently been seen, on the wing, during the greater part of the day, even when the atmosphere is perfectly pure and clear, and while the sun is shining in all its glory. It is equally known that the Night-Hawk retires to rest shortly after dusk, at the very time when the loud notes of the Whip-poor-will, or those of the Chuck-will's-widow, both of which are nocturnal rambles, are heard echoing from the places to which these birds resort.

About the 1st of April, the Night-Hawk makes its appearance in the lower parts of Louisiana, on its way eastward. None of them breed in that State, or in that of Mississippi, nor am I inclined to believe any where south of the neighbourhood of Charleston, in South Carolina. The species is, however, seen in all the Southern States, on its passage to and from those of the east. The Night-Hawks pass with so much comparative swiftness over Louisiana in the spring, that in a few days after their first appearance none are to be seen; nor are any to be found there until their return in autumn, when, on account of the ample supply of food they still meet with at this late season, they remain several weeks, gleaning the insects off the cotton fields, waste lands, or sugar plantations, and gambolling over the prairies, lakes or rivers, from morning till night. Their return from the Middle Districts varies according to the temperature of the season, from the 15th of August to late in October.

Their migrations are carried on over so great an extent, and that so loosely, that you might conceive it their desire to glean the whole country, as they advance with a front extending from the mouths of the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains, passing in this manner from the south far beyond our eastern boundary lines. Thus they are enabled to disperse and breed throughout the whole Western and Eastern States, from South Carolina to Maine. On their way they may be seen passing over our cities and villages, alighting on the trees that embellish our streets, and even on chimney tops, from which they are heard to squeak their sharp notes, to the amusement or surprise of those who observe them.

I have seen this species in the British Provinces of New Brunswick and

Nova Scotia, where they remain so late as the beginning of October, but I observed none in Newfoundland, or on the shores of Labrador. In going north, their appearance in the Middle States is about the first of May; but they seldom reach Maine before June.

The Night-Hawk has a firm, light, and greatly prolonged flight. In dull cloudy weather, it may be seen on the wing during the whole day, and is more clamorous than at any other time. The motions of its wings while flying are peculiarly graceful, and the playfulness which it evinces renders its flight quite interesting. The bird appears to glide through the air with all imaginable ease, assisting its ascent, or supporting itself on high, by irregular hurried flappings performed at intervals, as if it had unexpectedly fallen in with its prey, pursued, and seized it. Its onward motion is then continued. It moves in this manner, either upwards in circles, emitting a loud sharp squeak at the beginning of each sudden start it takes, or straight downwards, then to the right or left, whether high or low, as it presses onward, now skimming closely over the rivers, lakes, or shores of the Atlantic, and again wending its way over the forests or mountain tops. During the love season its mode of flight is particularly interesting: the male may be said to court his mate entirely on the wing, strutting as it were through the air, and performing a variety of evolutions with the greatest ease and elegance, insomuch that no bird with which I am acquainted can rival it in this respect.

It frequently raises itself a hundred yards, sometimes much more, and apparently in the same careless manner already mentioned, its squeaking notes becoming louder and more frequent the higher it ascends; when, checking its course, it at once glides obliquely downwards, with wings and tail half closed, and with such rapidity that a person might easily conceive it to be about to dash itself against the ground. But when close to the earth, often at no greater distance than a few feet, it instantaneously stretches out its wings, so as to be nearly directed downwards at right angles with the body, expands its tail, and thus suddenly checks its downward career. It then brushes, as it were, through the air, with inconceivable force, in a semi-circular line of a few yards in extent. This is the moment when the singular noise produced by this bird is heard, for the next instant it rises in an almost perpendicular course, and soon begins anew this curious mode of courtship. The concussion caused, at the time the bird passes the centre of its plunge, by the new position of its wings, which are now brought almost instantly to the wind, like the sails of a ship suddenly thrown aback, is the cause of this singular noise. The female does not produce this, although she frequently squeaks whilst on the wing.

Sometimes, when several males are paying their addresses to the same female, the sight of those beaux plunging through the air in different direc-

tions, is curious and highly entertaining. This play is quickly over, however, for no sooner has the female made her choice, than her approved gives chase to all intruders, drives them beyond his dominions, and returns with exultation, plunging and gambolling on the wing, but with less force, and without nearing the ground.

In windy weather, and as the dusk of the evening increases, the Night-Hawk flies lower and more swiftly than ever, making wide and irregular deviations from its general course, to overtake an insect which its keen eye has seen at a distance, after which it continues onward as before. When darkness comes on, it alights either on the ground or on a tree, where it spends the night, now and then uttering its squeak.

These birds can scarcely walk on the ground, on account of the small size and position of their legs, which are placed very far back, for which reason they cannot stand erect, but rest their breast on the ground, or on the branch of a tree, on which they are obliged to alight sidewise. They alight with ease, however, and squat on branches or fence-rails, now and then on the tops of houses or barns. In all such positions they are easily approached. I have neared them when on a fence or low wall to within a few feet, when they would look upon me with their large mild eyes more as a friend than an enemy, although they flew off the moment they observed any thing suspicious in my movements. They now and then squeak while thus seated, and if this happens when they are perched on the trees of our cities, they seldom fail to attract the attention of persons passing.

In Louisiana this species is called by the French Creoles "*Crapaud volant*," in Virginia "*Bat*;" but the name by which it is most commonly known is "*Night-Hawk*." The beauty and rapidity of its motions render it a tempting object to sportsmen generally, and its flesh is by no means unpalatable. Thousands are shot on their return to the south during the autumn, when they are fat and juicy. Now and then at this season, they plunge through the air, but the rustling sound of their wings at this or any other time after the love season is less remarkable.

In the Middle States, about the 20th of May, the Night-Hawk, without much care as to situation, deposits its two, almost oval, freckled eggs on the bare ground, or on an elevated spot in the ploughed fields, or even on the naked rock, sometimes in barren or open places in the skirts of the woods, never entering their depths. No nest is ever constructed, nor is the least preparation made by scooping the ground. They never, I believe, raise more than one brood in a season. The young are for some time covered with a soft down, the colour of which, being a dusky-brown, greatly contributes to their safety. Should the female be disturbed during incubation, she makes her escape, pretending lameness, fluttering and trembling, until she

feels assured that you have lost sight of her eggs or young, after which she flies off, and does not return until you have withdrawn, but she will suffer you to approach her, if unseen, until within a foot or two of her eggs. During incubation, the male and female sit alternately. After the young are tolerably grown, and require less warmth from their parents, the latter are generally found in their immediate neighbourhood, quietly squatted on some fence, rail, or tree, where they remain so very silent and motionless that it is no easy matter to discover them.

When wounded they scramble off very awkwardly, and if taken in the hand immediately open their mouth to its full extent repeatedly, as if the mandibles moved on hinges worked by a spring. They also strike with their wings in the manner of pigeons, but without any effect.

The food of the Night-Hawk consists entirely of insects, especially those of the Coleopterous order, although they also seize on moths and caterpillars, and are very expert at catching crickets and grasshoppers, with which they sometimes gorge themselves, as they fly low over the ground with great rapidity. They now and then drink whilst flying closely over the water, in the manner of swallows.

None of these birds remain during the winter in any portion of the United States. The Chuck-will's-widow alone have I heard, and found far up the St. John's River, in East Florida, in January. Frequently during autumn, at New Orleans, I have known some of these birds to remain searching for food over the meadows and river until the rainy season had begun, and then is the time at which the sportsmen shoot many of them down; but the very next day, if the weather was still drizzly, scarcely one could be seen there. When returning from the northern districts at a late period of the year, they pass close over the woods, and with so much rapidity, that you can obtain only a single glimpse of them.

While at Indian Key, on the coast of Florida, I saw a pair of these birds killed by lightning, while they were on wing, during a tremendous thunderstorm. They fell on the sea, and after picking them up I examined them carefully, but failed to discover the least appearance of injury on the feathers or in the internal parts.

NIGHT-HAWK, *Caprimulgus Americanus*, Wils. Amer. Orn., vol. v. p. 65.

CAPRIMULGUS VIRGINIANUS, Bonap. Syn., p. 62.

CAPRIMULGUS (CHORDEILES) VIRGINIANUS, Swains. and Rich. F. Bor. Amer., vol. i. p. 62.

NIGHT-HAWK, *Caprimulgus Americanus*, Nutt. Man., vol. i. p. 619.

NIGHT-HAWK, *Caprimulgus Virginianus*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. ii. p. 273; vol. v. p. 406.

Upper parts brownish-black, mottled with white and pale reddish-brown; a conspicuous white bar extending across the inner web of the first, and the

whole breadth of the next four quills; tail-feathers barred with brownish-grey, the four outer on each side plain brownish-black towards the end, with a large white spot; sides of the head and fore neck mottled like the back; a broad white band, in the form of the letter V reversed, on the throat and sides of the neck; the rest of the lower parts greyish-white, transversely undulated with dark brown. Female similar, with the dark parts more brown, the white more tinged with red, the band on the throat brownish-white, and the white spots on the tail-feathers wanting.

Male, $9\frac{1}{2}$, $23\frac{1}{2}$. Female, $9\frac{3}{4}$, $23\frac{3}{4}$.

FAMILY V. CYPSELINÆ. SWIFTS.

Mouth opening to beneath the hind part of the eyes; bill extremely short, very broad at the base, compressed at the end; upper mandible decurved at the point, the edge inflected, with an indistinct sinus. Nostrils basal, approximate, oblong. Head large and depressed; neck short; body rather slender. Feet extremely short; tarsus rounded, destitute of scutella; toes extremely short, the three anterior nearly equal; hind toe very small, and versatile; claws strong, compressed, arched, very acute. Plumage compact; no bristles at the base of the upper mandible; wings extremely elongated, falciform, the first quill longest; tail of ten feathers. Œsophagus of moderate width, without crop; stomach oblong, moderately muscular, with a dense rugous epithelium; intestine short, and rather wide; no cæca. No inferior laryngeal muscles. Nest in crevices or holes, or attached to high places. Eggs elongated, white.

GENUS I.—CHÆTURA, *Stephens*. SPINE-TAIL.

All the characters as above. Tarsus bare, longer than the middle toe, which scarcely exceeds the outer. Tail short, even, the shafts very strong, and prolonged into acuminate points.

Night Hawk.
White Oak. Quercus Alba.

Audubon, John James. 1840. "The Night-Hawk, *Chordeiles virginianus*. Briss. [Pl. 43]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 1, 159–163. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319156>.

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