



Common Nighthawk

Photo: © Gordon Court



Scientific name
Chordeiles minor

Taxon
Birds

COSEWIC status
Special Concern

Canadian range
Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, Québec, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador

Reason for designation
This aerial insectivore is a widespread breeding bird across southern and boreal Canada. Its population in southern Canada has declined by 68% since 1970, but the rate of decline has slowed appreciably over the past decade, and the species appears to be quite abundant in suitable boreal habitats. Concerns remain over the effects of human activities and changing climates in reducing food and nest-site availability. The causes of decline are not well known, but include threats that reduce the numbers of aerial

insects on which this species forages, which can be attributed to agricultural and other pesticides, and changes in precipitation, temperature and hydrological regimes. An increasing frequency of severe or extreme weather events is also likely impacting this species by reducing its productivity and increasing mortality.

Wildlife species description and significance

Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*) is the most frequently seen member of the nightjar family. It pursues and catches flying insects on the wing, and is most active from dusk to dawn. It is extremely well-camouflaged by its mottled brown plumage when perched on the ground or horizontal surfaces. Common Nighthawk is most often seen in flight, when it can be recognized by its distinctive bounding flight, white bar near the end of the wing, and nasal peent call.



Photo: © Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada; photo: Charles Francis

Distribution
The species breeds across Canada, as far north as central Yukon and southwestern Northwest Territories in the west, and slightly north of the Boreal Shield in the east. It breeds throughout the contiguous United States and locally south into Central America. It winters in South America, mainly in the lowlands east of the Andes Mountains.



Breeding, migrating and wintering range of Common Nighthawk.

Source: COSEWIC. 2018. COSEWIC assessment and status report on the Common Nighthawk *Chordeiles minor* in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Ottawa. xi + 50 pp.

Habitat

Common Nighthawk breeds in a range of open and partially open habitats, including forest openings and post-fire habitats, prairies, bogs, and rocky or sandy natural habitats, as well as disturbed areas. It is also found in settled areas that meet its habitat needs, those with open areas for foraging and bare or short-cropped surfaces for nesting. The species' use of a wide range of habitats makes it difficult to estimate trends in habitat availability, except in urban habitats, where their main nesting sites – flat graveled roofs – are disappearing.

Biology

Common Nighthawk can breed by its second year, lays 1-2 eggs, and raises one brood per year. The limited data available on longevity suggest it lives for

4-5 years on average, with a generation time of about 2-3 years. Other key demographic variables, such as survival rates and site fidelity, are poorly known. Survival and reproduction of individuals are thought to be constrained by the availability of flying insects on which to forage.

Population Sizes and Trends

Population size estimates are poor, because Common Nighthawk is difficult to detect during most of the day, and much of its boreal habitat is not well-surveyed. The Canadian population is estimated from Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) results as 900,000 adults, about 10% of the global population. The Boreal Avian Modelling project, which collects data from additional sources in the northern parts of the breeding range, estimates a population of 270,000 adults in Canada, although this value is likely an underestimate. The BBS provides the best available information on population trends, especially in southern Canada. It shows that numbers there declined by 68% between 1970 and 2015, and that the rate of decline has slowed appreciably to 12% over the 10-year period 2005-2015. Analysis of eBird records suggests that the population may have stabilized in recent years, and the species appears to be quite abundant in suitable boreal habitats.

Threats and Limiting Factors

Widespread threats that may have an important impact include reduced abundance of aerial insects due to effects of agricultural and other pesticides, changes in precipitation and hydrological regimes, changes in temperature regimes, and increasing frequency of severe or extreme weather events. Several other threats have been proposed, but appear to be less severe or affect only a small proportion of the population.

Protection, Status and Ranks

Common Nighthawk and its nests are protected under the *Migratory Birds Convention Act*, 1994, and the species is listed as Threatened under Schedule 1 of the *Species at Risk Act*. A national recovery strategy has been developed to address key threats, close knowledge gaps and identify critical habitat. The species is ranked as Not at Risk globally (G5), Apparently Secure (N4B) in Canada and Secure (N5B) in the United States. However, it is considered as

Critically Imperilled (S1), Imperilled (S2), or Vulnerable (S3) in 14 of 48 states and nine of 13 provinces and territories in which it occurs. In the remaining provinces (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario) it is ranked Apparently Secure (S4) or Secure (S5).

Source: COSEWIC. 2018. COSEWIC assessment and status report on the Common Nighthawk *Chordeiles minor* in Canada. Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. Ottawa. xi + 50 pp.

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