



This month's mystery bird is in some ways even more mysterious than the photo suggests. But before proceeding down that road, let's try to figure out what we are looking at. From the appearance of the surrounding grasses and lichens in the photograph, it would appear that the bird is about eight or ten inches in length and that it is probably a species that either feels comfortable sitting on the ground, or else has extra-short legs! Furthermore, without too much imagination, it looks like the bird has marvelous protective coloration. Indeed, if we were to be fifteen feet away from the bird in life, would we notice it at all?

Concentrating more closely on the bird itself, it seems to have a curiously short bill — so short it can hardly be seen. In addition, it has very large eyes for a bird of its apparent size. The combination of cryptic plumage pattern, very short bill, large eyes, apparently short legs, and ground-resting behavior all suggest that the bird is a member of one of the most frequently misunderstood (and arguably least-known) groups of birds in the world: the nightjars, Order Caprimulgiformes.

Assuming that the bird is a nightjar of some sort, we have three possibilities to choose from here in Massachusetts: Common Nighthawk, Chuck-will's-

widow, and Whip-poor-will. Perhaps the most important plumage feature to note on the bird in the photograph is the presence of distinct pale (white or pale gray) feathers on the upper wing coverts. These features show up in marked contrast to the darker feathers of the scapulars and the more mottled appearance of the median wing coverts. This feather contrast happens to be a feature more typical of nighthawks than of the other two Bay State nightjars. Unfortunately, it is not possible to see in the photograph whether the primaries possess the signature white band of the Common Nighthawk.

Returning to the bill — tiny structure that it is! — we can observe that there are no prominent “whiskers” (i.e., rictal bristles) near the sides of the upper mandible around the mouth opening. This absence of rictal bristles is an important anatomical difference between nighthawks and the other two Massachusetts “goatsuckers.” Furthermore, the mystery bird seems to have a rather small-headed appearance, and does not exhibit the flat-headed, no-necked appearance so characteristic of Chuck-will’s-widows and Whip-poor-wills.

By this process of elimination, the mystery nightjar turns out to be a Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*). As suggested at the outset, nightjars are perhaps the most mysterious birds on the planet for a variety of reasons: their nocturnal behavior, their vibrant calls, the similarity and cryptic quality of their plumage, their tiny feet that are incapable of perching on tree branches the way many other birds do, and the fact that many species’ nesting habits are unusual or are hardly known at all. As examples of the last point, in Massachusetts the Common Nighthawk nests almost exclusively on gravel roofs in urban areas, and the Chuck-will’s-widow has almost certainly been nesting in the Commonwealth since at least the 1970s — yet no one has ever located a Bay State nest.

The Common Nighthawk is an uncommon and declining summer resident in urban areas in Massachusetts where flat gravel roofs are available for nesting sites. Nighthawks are most conspicuous during late August when their twilight migration can be observed from favored vantage points, especially in the Connecticut River Valley.

AT A GLANCE

Photo by Olin Sewall Pettingill, Jr.



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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