

The Nesting of the Eastern Nighthawk .

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Nesting of the Eastern Nighthawk

This particular nest was found approximately 2 miles southeast of camp on June 28, 1934 in an Aspen and *Pteris aquilina* association. The following day I was invited to see the nest and decided to use it for study in connection with my bird course. Early the next day I began more accurate observations of the bird and her nest, noting that the female was the incubator and that her nest was only solid ground covered thinly with a few dead brown leaves and located about one and a half feet from the base of a small Aspen tree, growing on the edge of an unused path, which had become embedded with *Pteris aquilina*. At this time I also made an accurate measurement of the eggs and recorded carefully my description of the two eggs and according to Barrows' Michigan Bird Life no two set of eggs resemble each other in coloration and no two people would give the same description. The eggs were 31 x 23mm and 32 x 23 mm each. They were a light grey background with darker grey, light brown and dark brown blotches giving the appearance of a heavily, but uniformly blotched and mottled eggs. I was surprised to learn through my library readings on the Eastern Nighthawk that all authors gave the bare ground in open fields or bare rocks as the most common nesting site of this bird while Barrows emphatically stated he had never known eggs to be laid in woods or even in the shade of a bush. This nest was slightly shaded by the ferns.

Before leaving the nest I decided to learn just how near I could approach the nest without disturbing the bird and also determine at what distance I would have to place myself in order to get her to return. At the same time I was wondering whether sight or noise was less disturbing to her. The bird being off the nest I selected a large stump approximately 20 feet away from the nest and concealed myself behind it for twenty minutes.

She made no effort to return so I moved to a more distant stump getting no response from her after another twenty minutes. I, then, made myself conspicuous by widely circling the nest and then walking out of sight of the nest. In less than five minutes she flew directly to the nest. In avoiding showing myself and as quietly as possible I, again, made an approach to the nest but just before sighting her I changed my position by getting on my stomach and in this manner I was able to get within four feet of her. In this position and at this distance I noticed her position as facing toward the southwest and that she was practically motionless except for a constant quivering of the chin, supposedly due to the heat of the day as the time was approaching noon. In leaving I disturbed her and noticed that her flight was practically noiseless and that she flew low over the vegetation down into the ferns out of sight not far away.

The second day I visited the nest after noon and found the female still doing the incubating and facing the direction as the day before and when I frightened her she flew away in the same direction as the previous day, which direction was slightly southeast. However, she behaved slightly different. Instead of flying directly out of sight she spread her wings as she flew down to the ground and with her mouth open and fluttering wings she turned to face me not so very far away. With a peculiar purring noise she came toward me for a short distance and flew away. In this spot I sat for forty-five minutes, but being within 20 feet of her nest and not concealed she would not return until I had moved a great distance away. After seeing that she was safe on the nest I left without having learned anything particularly interesting and did not visit the nest the following day.

On the third day, I, with a companion, went to the nest early in the morning with the purpose of setting up a blind. Other than accomplishing this

the day proved to be uneventful with the exception of learning later in the day that the blind, which had been placed approximately 15 feet away, ~~was~~ not a disturbing factor in the life of a female nighthawk.

The day following I did not visit the nest but someone did and reported the bird on the nest. The next day I, with a companion, visited the nest early in the morning. With a moving picture camera we slipped into the blind and made a picture of her nest. Thinking we might do better on the outside we carefully came out but disturbed her before we could get the camera set up again. Then entering the blind again we patiently waited one half hour for her return, hoping to get a very good picture of this action. Realizing that she knew we were in the blind I very carelessly left the nesting site and in five minutes she flew directly to the nest. The camera being ready the following action was taken. After flying down to the nest and reaching eggs she, with her short bill, pulled the eggs under her, constantly shifting her position as she did so. When she had thus securely hidden her eggs she was in a position facing north so by readjustment she finally faced almost west. Having accomplished our purpose we left the area and on the following day I visited the nest early in the morning and again in the evening just after a big rain. At both times she was on the nest.

The next time I visited the nest ~~I~~ did some experimenting. I tried talking aloud, keeping myself out of sight, to see if she would notice it. She showed no interest or signs of it. Then I crept into the blind, pushed my hand and arm through the peep-hole, with my ~~note~~ note-book in hand I waved my arm frantically in the air. At times I pounded on the blind with the book, finally dropping it on the ground. She sat perfectly motionless during all this so by stretching myself on the floor of the blind and

forcing my head and body from under the blind I was practically erect before she flew. I went into the blind again while she was only a few feet away and had to leave before she returned.

Probably the most interesting event in my nesting study was the visit of the male. On the night of July the ninth between the hours of 8:00 and 9:00, while listening to the "peents" and the zooming of several nighthawks in the area of my nest, I noticed a slight movement from the bird on the nest. I watched her more closely and also the nighthawks in the air. One appeared to circle nearer the nest than did the others and as it did she, the bird on the nest, began a soft cooing conversation which lasted for several minutes and until the male flew directly down to the nest and up to her where he conversed with her freely, in a much deeper tone, something which I could not understand. After the conversation she moved off the eggs and he looked them over carefully before flying away. This interested me enough to visit the nest the following evening arriving there at 9:00 and for the first time finding her away. She returned in about 25 minutes and flew down in a very quick and businesslike manner. Having my flashlight with me, I flashed it off and on through the peep-hole to see if she would give me a little action to write about. I left the nest at 10:30 P. M. ^{without} further observations.

During the next several days I went at varying times of the day, always to find her on the nest facing the same direction, flying away in the usual manner. On the 13th of July, the 16th nesting day (that I know about), and the day that the eggs should have hatched, I went to my nest early in the morning with thumb tacks, cheese cloth and a few other minor articles, to put up a fence around my nest. Learning that nighthawks move their young when they are disturbed I was hoping to prevent this.

After spending one half hour in setting up the fence I went away and returned in ten minutes to find her on the nest. The following afternoon I spent a couple of hours in the blind but added no new knowledge to my nesting study. I visited the nest before breakfast the next day and found the female still doing the incubating.

By the 16th of July there was still no young and on the 17th I, with two companions, visited the nest for the chief purpose of taking pictures of her. She was on the nest when we arrived but ^{was} frightened her away, so we set up the camera, placing it on the outside of the blind and covering it with green netting before going into the blind. After sitting in the blind for sometime without getting her return we each, one by one, left the blind, wishing to get her on the nest again. After an hour or more we decided the eggs were getting too much heat from the sun so we shaded them by anchoring a broken aspen twig near them. Leaving the eggs thus shaded I returned the following day late in the afternoon to find the bird gone and the eggs cold. I brought the eggs and the blind into camp and the eggs were examined and pronounced as infertile.

Summing my knowledge on the nesting of nighthawks I would say that the male does not always assist in the incubation. The female evidently does her own feeding or at least it appears so. She is a very consistent incubator, being found off the nest only once. She is faithful to her aim, going beyond the usual number of incubating days, giving her a total of 20 - 21 days, as far I was able to observe. The eggs were either infertile or spoiled by something for which I may ^{have} ~~not~~ been responsible such as keeping her from the nest too often or probably handling the eggs too frequently.