



How to Help

Common Nighthawks

A widespread summer resident across most of North America, the Common Nighthawk is a robin-sized gray, brown, and black mottled bird most often seen perched during the day or in flight as it chases flying insects at night. Nighthawks need bare gravelly areas or rooftops for nesting sites, and can be helped by maintaining traditional gravel roofs on large buildings or by creating a smaller gravel-covered area on more modern rubber or asphalt rooftops.

What Common Nighthawks Need

Food: Common Nighthawks are frequently seen foraging in late afternoon through dusk over fields, riparian forests, parks and open spaces, open water, and around street lights where flying insects concentrate. They eat mostly flying ants, beetles, and true bugs, which they chase and capture individually.

Nesting: Nighthawks lay their eggs in a scrape on disturbed bare ground or gravelly areas, including coastal sand dunes and beaches, burned or cleared forest areas, open sage or grassland areas, farm fields, rock outcrops and flat gravel rooftops on large buildings. On rooftops, they prefer to nest within a few feet of a parapet or wall.

Shelter: The Common Nighthawk roosts during the day, perched on a tree limb or power line, or on a fence post, the ground, or a flat rooftop.

Other: Nighthawks drink from rivers and lakes while in flight. Significant numbers are killed by collisions with power lines; in spring males crash into them with greater frequency than females, probably during courtship displays, and both sexes collide with them during migration.

How You Can Help

- While it is difficult to provide food for nighthawks directly, avoid using pesticides that kill flying insects the birds depend on for food.
- In urban areas, plant native trees and shrubs as habitat for flying insects that nighthawks can eat.
- If possible, maintain gravel roofing on large buildings. Rubberized roofing does not provide camouflage for eggs, allows eggs to roll, and becomes too hot for eggs.
- On rubberized or other smooth flat rooftops, provide a 15 x 15 foot gravel area as a nesting pad, preferably in a corner of the roof where it can get afternoon shade.
- In urban areas, plant large shade trees that birds can use as a sheltered roost site during the day.
- Gravel-covered nighthawk roof pads may be able to provide safe havens during migration as well as the breeding season. More research is necessary.
- Support efforts to keep rivers and lakes free of pesticides and other pollutants.
- Encourage your city, county, and state to require power companies to put bird "flight diverters" on all new or replacement power lines and other wires to make them more visible to birds.