

Arizona's Nighthawks

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Scientific Names: Lesser nighthawk: *Chordeiles acutipennis*; common nighthawk: *Chordeiles minor*. The genus comes from *choros*, meaning a circular dance, and *deile*, meaning evening, and refers to the birds' nocturnal foraging habits. The specific epithet, *acutipennis*, means sharply pointed and refers to wing shape; *minor* describes the common nighthawk's size compared to larger European nighthawk varieties.

Description: Nighthawks are dark-eyed, cryptically colored nocturnal birds that are regularly mistaken for owls. Unlike the upright stance and direct flight style of most owls, however, nighthawks have a forward-facing, birdlike posture and exhibit an erratic, mothlike flight pattern. Arizona has two nighthawk species, the lesser and the common. Both are medium-sized and appear gray-brown, mottled with buff, brown, and black. Both have white below the chin and long, pointed wings with white wing bars that differ slightly between the species. Although their plumage has subtle differences, discerning the two species is most easily accomplished by their call. Lesser nighthawks make a distinctive trilling sound; common nighthawks utter a nasal *preent*. Common nighthawk males also make a "booming" sound with their wings as part of their aerial courtship display.

Habitat: Lesser nighthawks are well adapted to temperature extremes and nest in some of Arizona's hottest and most inhospitable habitats, the arid lowlands and sparsely vegetated valleys and washes. Under cold conditions, they enter torpor, a hibernation-like state in which their metabolism slows considerably. Common nighthawks frequent a wide variety of habitats, but

prefer open woodlands, forest clearings, grasslands, and agricultural or suburban areas. They are often encountered in Arizona's pinyon-juniper woodlands.

Distribution: Both of Arizona's nighthawks are migratory birds that winter south of the border. During spring and



summer, lesser nighthawks occur in the southern portions of the desert southwest, and common nighthawks occur in the western United States, Canada, and central Mexico. In Arizona, lesser nighthawks generally occur below 5,000 ft. in the southern half of the state. Common nighthawks occur in central and northern Arizona at 4,800 to 7,600 feet. The species overlap locally in southeast and north-central Arizona.

Biology: Nighthawks belong to the bird family Caprimulgids, from the Latin *capri* and *mulgus* meaning "goat

milkers," but commonly called "goat-suckers," referring to the ancient belief that nighthawks and their relatives sucked milk from goats. In truth, the birds were feeding on barnyard insects, with goat milk nowhere on the menu. Nighthawks eat on the wing a diverse diet of flying insects including cicadas, flies, and mosquitoes. They have small but broad mouths that are perfect for scooping up insects in flight. It is common to see nighthawks feeding at street lights, attracted by the insects swarming beneath the artificial glow.

Arizona's nighthawks typically nest on the ground and, as a result, sometimes lose eggs and young to predators. The females select the nest sites, usually a patch of pebbly ground in full sun or beneath a shrub. They generally lay two well-camouflaged eggs (that look like rocks) per clutch and incubate them for 18-19 days. Females will sometimes roll their eggs into the shade during the heat of day, and return them to the nest in the evening. Chicks are semiprecocial at hatch and able to crawl short distances within 1-2 days. Young fly at 21 days and are capable of sustained flight at 23 days.

Status: Both lesser and common are encountered throughout their Arizona ranges. Neither is on the department's Wildlife of Special Concern list.

Management Needs: None at present in Arizona. The federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act prohibits harassment of most wild birds, and protects both species. No other protective measures are in place at this time. 🦉

Wildlife biologist Cathryn Wise-Gervais can trill just like a lesser nighthawk and loves watching these birds take to the sky at Phoenix's North Mountain Park.