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## Mobbing of Common Nighthawks as Cases of Mistaken Identity

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**ABSTRACT.**—We report five instances of small birds mobbing Common Nighthawks (*Chordeiles minor*). In each case, the nighthawk was roosting in a tree during daytime and was mobbed by a group of birds in a manner typical of that directed toward an avian predator. We found only four previously published accounts of perched caprimulgiforms being mobbed. Mobbing birds probably mistake caprimulgiforms for owls because of convergence in plumage coloration and pattern between these two groups of crepuscular-nocturnal birds. Received 29 September 2010. Accepted 9 December 2010.

Most species of “typical” owls (Strigidae) and nightjars (Caprimulgidae) have variegated brown, black, gray, and white plumage that helps provide camouflage for individuals at nests and roosts (Cleere 1998, Marks et al. 1999). Many owls prey on small birds and are frequently mobbed by them (Altmann 1956, Gehlbach and Leverett 1995). In contrast, nightjars feed almost exclusively on aerial insects and are not normally targeted by mobbing birds, presumably because they pose no threat to them. We describe five instances in which a Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*)

was mobbed by a group of small birds. We also review the scant literature on mobbing of perched caprimulgiforms, none of which appears in the most recent reviews of caprimulgiform biology (e.g., Poulin et al. 1996; Cleere 1998, 1999, 2010). The behavior probably results from similarities in plumage between caprimulgiforms and owls.

### OBSERVATIONS

On 23 August 1998, at 1330 hrs MST, JSM encountered a group of warblers mobbing a Common Nighthawk perched on a horizontal limb about 7 m high in an ash (*Fraxinus* sp.) in the town park at Scobey, Montana. During the next few minutes, the warblers gave chip notes, flicked their wings, and hopped from branch to branch <1.0 m from the nighthawk, always facing it while they mobbed. The group consisted of at least 10 Yellow Warblers (*Dendroica petechia*), two Blackpoll Warblers (*D. striata*), and two American Redstarts (*Setophaga ruticilla*). The warblers did not strike the nighthawk, which was oriented parallel to the branch and made no obvious movements in response to the mobbing birds. The warblers departed from the tree in <10 min, while the nighthawk remained on its perch. JSM later found several other perched nighthawks in the park that were not mobbed while he was present.

On 4 August 2001, CSC heard mobbing calls

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from a stand of trees near Owings Mills, Maryland, and found a perched Common Nighthawk being mobbed by a group of birds that included several juvenile Eastern Bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*) and a Pine Warbler (*D. pinus*), Prairie Warbler (*D. discolor*), Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*), Canada Warbler (*Wilsonia canadensis*), and Baltimore Oriole (*Icterus galbula*). After about 2 min, CSC accidentally flushed the nighthawk; the mobbing birds flew but did not pursue the nighthawk. About 15 min later, CSC encountered another group of birds vigorously mobbing a second perched nighthawk in the same manner as the earlier observation, although he did not record the species composition of the group. The mobbers exhibited typical behaviors of hopping from branch to branch within 1 m of the nighthawks, giving scolding calls, and flicking their wings, but they did not strike either nighthawk.

On 19 September 2007, at 1600 hrs CST, DAB heard scolding calls as he walked along a road near Winona, Minnesota. He looked up and found a Common Nighthawk perched on a horizontal branch above the road, surrounded by a group of mobbing birds that consisted of a Downy Woodpecker (*Picoides pubescens*), an Eastern Phoebe (*Sayornis phoebe*), two Eastern Bluebirds, and a Magnolia Warbler (*Dendroica magnolia*). A passing car flushed the nighthawk, which flew from view. The mobbing birds immediately dispersed as well.

On the morning of 25 August 2009, MCK spotted a Common Nighthawk perched on a dead branch in a maple (*Acer* sp.) near Algona, Iowa. Shortly thereafter a Black-capped Chickadee (*Poecile atricapillus*) landed nearby and mobbed the nighthawk. It was soon joined by six more chickadees and a Black-and-white Warbler. The birds mobbed for several minutes and then flew away. The nighthawk remained on its perch the entire time.

#### DISCUSSION

We found only three previous accounts of a perched nightjar being mobbed. Pickwell and Smith (1938:212) reported that “8 or 10 English Sparrows and 6 robins were noted mobbing an Eastern Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*) as it sat lengthwise on an elm tree...on May 12, 1927.” Ficken et al. (1967) watched five Carolina Chickadees (*P. carolinensis*), five Tufted Titmice (*Baeolophus bicolor*), two Blue-gray Gnatcatch-

ers (*Poliophtila caerulea*), and 10 warblers of four species mobbing a Chuck-will’s-widow (*Caprimulgus carolinensis*) that was perched in a tree. The mobbing lasted ~10 min, during which the nightjar did not change its posture. More recently, Kent (1999) observed a group of about 40 small birds mobbing a Common Nighthawk in Iowa on 30 August 1999. Mobbing species included Northern Flicker (*Colaptes auratus*), Downy Woodpecker, Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*), Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*), American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*), Gray Catbird (*Dumetella carolinensis*), eight species of warblers, Northern Cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*), and Rose-breasted Grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*); the mobbing behavior lasted ~10 min. In each case, the authors suggested the mobbers mistook the nightjar for an owl.

Castro-Siqueira (2010) watched a Common Potoo (*Nyctibius griseus*) in central Brazil being mobbed by three Rufous Horneros (*Furnarius rufus*), two Great Kiskadees (*Pitangus sulphuratus*), and seven Chalk-browed Mockingbirds (*Mimus saturninus*) for 15 min before the mobbers left the tree in which the potoo was perched. The same group of mockingbirds returned in 5 min and resumed mobbing the potoo; less than 5 min later they were joined by three horneros, two kiskadees, a Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*), and a Rufous-collared Sparrow (*Zonotrichia capensis*), each of which mobbed the potoo for another 10 min. None of the mobbers struck the potoo, which remained motionless on its perch during both mobbing bouts. Castro-Siqueira (2010) considered the mobbers to mistake the potoo for an owl but cast doubt on that notion because a Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*) that was perched in plain view 20 m from the potoo was not mobbed.

Owls and caprimulgiforms have converged in evolving cryptic plumage and thus resemble one another, at least superficially. We agree with Pickwell and Smith (1938), Ficken et al. (1967), and Kent (1999) that this resemblance at times causes small birds to mistake perched caprimulgiforms for owls and mob them accordingly. An alternative hypothesis is that nighthawks and potoos are mobbed because they resemble Chuck-will’s-widows, which occasionally prey on birds (Thayer 1899, Owre 1967). We cannot reject this hypothesis but consider it unlikely because birds that mobbed the potoo in Brazil and

the nighthawk in Montana would not overlap in range with a Chuck-will's-widow at any time of year. Mobbing of a nighthawk, potoo, or any other strictly insectivorous caprimulgiform in either scenario would be a case of mistaken identity. The scarcity of published observations of caprimulgiforms being mobbed suggests the behavior is uncommon. The topic is worthy of attention because it could reveal new information on mobbing behavior, predator recognition, and interactions among caprimulgiforms and other birds.

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