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NIGHTHAWK, HUNTER OF THE HEAVENS

(William L. Finley)

The world is never more than half asleep. When the day fades and twilight drops the curtain that turns daylight into darkness, soft footsteps and hidden voices appear everywhere in the fields and woods and overhead. A bird of the night that is heard more than it is seen is sure to gather up a bag of superstitions. Mystery feeds the imagination. The nighthawk has collected a variety of names, such as goat-sucker, bull-bat, nightjar and mosquito-hawk. The term goat-sucker is interesting because early Europeans thought the birds thrived by relieving goats of their milk. The idea was fostered by seeing the birds flying near the goats in the twilight when they were catching insects that live about these domestic animals.

Nighthawk is a very misleading name since the bird has none of the qualifications of a bird of prey. Its feet are so small and weak that they are not even used for perching and in no way resemble the talons of a hawk. Nor is there any resemblance of its beak to that of a true hawk. If a person had a mouth like that of a nighthawk it would extend around to his ears. The whole face is all mouth. It is valuable as a fly-trap, as the bird is really a flycatcher.

The flight of a nighthawk is erratic and jerky and is punctuated by a nasal note that is not musical like the call of its cousin, the whip-poor-will. Often as the bird circles and wings up, its flight is terminated by an aerial dive earthward that ends in a booming sound as its wings check the descent. The long narrow wings, each crossed with a white bar, and the white

throat patch are easy marks of identity.

None of the nighthawk family have ever interested themselves in nest building. The home is on the bare ground and there is no attempt to even scratch out a depression in the earth. The two eggs are dropped just anywhere the bird happens to come to rest, as a rule in a bare spot in a field or in the gravel. Covered with brownish spots, they are protectively colored when in the midst of rocks of equal size.

Some of our birds are driven from the city because of the lack of nesting places. Not so with the nighthawk. While one might think the city furnishes no arid fields or rocky islands in its midst, yet the nighthawk has discovered a wide expanse of flat roofs of sky-scrappers above the crowded streets. The top of a twelve-story building with its tar and pebbles may seem like a deserted mountain-top, but it is the place where many of our nighthawks lay their eggs and bring up their young. On the top of the City Hall in the heat of the day I saw a nighthawk hovering over her eggs, not with the idea of warming them, but to keep them cool. One might think a bird couldn't stand such heat, but it does. If disturbed on her nest, the nighthawk flutters away as if she had a broken wing in an effort to lead you away from her home.

All summer long these birds flit and zigzag over the heart of the city during the night. As they like the twilight, perhaps the lights make it more convenient for them to catch the swarms of mosquitoes and flies that are always a nuisance to man. The nighthawk lives on nothing else. From the stomach of one nighthawk the remains of over five hundred mosquitoes were taken.

In another eighteen hundred winged ants were found. The stomach is enormous in comparison to the size of the bird. Quantities of food are needed to furnish energy to sustain its tireless flight.

As a race we complain of insect pests that interfere with our comfort and destroy our crops, but we are often so unappreciative and even careless in the protection of nature's check upon these. The nighthawk and the various species of swallows that continually skim the surface of ponds and like to live about our cities is they had more nesting places, as well as the bats that flit in the darkness, live entirely upon the different kinds of flying insects. No food is taken from the ground or from lighting in trees or bushes. The chase from birth to death is through the unlimited space overhead in the airways where insect life thrives. Since a bird eats its own weight or more of insect food every day, it is easy to imagine the plague mankind would suffer if it were not for our busy birds.