



The Nightjars of Long Hunter State Park

If you've ever been near Long Hunter's cedar glades at dusk, perhaps you've seen or heard one of the mysterious birds known as nightjars.

Three different members of the nightjar family are found here: Eastern Whip-poor-will, Chuck-will's-widow and Common Nighthawk.

Nightjars are nocturnal birds rarely seen but often heard. They are well camouflaged for their environment -- usually brownish-grayish in color -- and feature large eyes, tiny bills and short legs.

They feed on insects, nest on the ground, and are migratory, spending the winters mainly in Central and South America.

The nightjar you're most likely to see here is the Common Nighthawk (*Chordeiles minor*), which is often found zig-zagging across the sky above Long Hunter's glades and barrens during the late afternoon and evening.

This bird (pictured below), which is sometimes mistaken for a bat and called a "bull bat," darts through the sky eating moths and other flying insects. Its call is a short, nasal "pee-ik" sound.



It's perhaps most well known for its territorial display, when the male dives sharply toward the ground and then suddenly zooms back upward, creating a dramatic "whooshing" or booming sound with its wings.

Common Nighthawks nest in open areas. Around Long Hunter, they're usually found nesting in the gravelly glades, where their brown and gray color blends perfectly among the limestone gravel and dirt.



The brownish speckled eggs of Common Nighthawks (see photo above) are also well hidden, appearing as small, smooth stones among the rocky glades.

In cities, nighthawks occasionally nest on flat gravel roofs. Sometimes they are seen flying near stadium lights in pursuit of flying insects. During flight you might notice their distinctive white wing bars from underneath.

The Common Nighthawk migrates farther than any other North American bird, spending the winter in South America.

Of our three local nightjars, the one you're most likely to hear at Long Hunter is the Chuck-will's-widow (*Antrostomus carolinensis*). This is the largest nightjar in North America, averaging about 12 inches in length.

In the daytime, "Chucks" are almost invisible to the human eye (see image below), looking much like dead leaf litter as they rest motionless on the ground or on horizontal tree branches.



Though rarely seen, Chucks are often heard calling near the glades and prairies of Long Hunter around dusk. As their name implies, their song is a four-syllabled "chuck-will-wid-ow," although the soft "chuck" sound is difficult to hear unless the bird is nearby.

Whereas the nighthawk often hunts while flying high in the sky, the Chuck normally flies low to the ground while hunting insects, feeding mainly on beetles and moths – although they will occasionally include small birds in their diet.

Chucks typically nest in dense thickets on bare dirt, or among dead leaves or pine needles (see photo on next page).



Territorial males often chase each other while making an unusual "growling" sound.

The third of our nightjars, the Eastern Whip-poor-will (*Antrostomus vociferous*), looks similar to the Chuck but is smaller.

Around Long Hunter, Chucks are far more common than Whip-poor-wills, whose numbers have decreased dramatically here due to continued development and loss of habitat.

Whip-poor-wills prefer roosting in forests that have little or no underbrush and are close to open areas. They begin feeding on flying insects just after sunset and often feed again at dawn.

Studies have shown that these birds time their nesting habits so that chicks will hatch just before the full moon, giving them extra light to catch food for their young.

The Whip-poor-will's song is a repeated "whip-poor-weel," which is similar to the Chuck's call but faster and more continuous. Those who camp or live near Whip-poor-will habitat are often awakened by their seemingly endless singing at dawn.

In the wild, these birds have been known to live for up to 15 years.

Unfortunately all three of our nightjar species have been on the decline in Tennessee since the 1970's due to loss of their preferred habitat. It has been suggested that pesticide use has also played a role in this decline.

If you wish to hear or possibly see one of these unusual birds, Long Hunter State Park often conducts evening tours of Couchville Cedar Glade State Natural Area, where occasionally all three species can be heard.

Check Long Hunter's schedule of events for upcoming night hikes and evening tours: <https://tnstateparks.com/parks/events/long-hunter>.

Brochure created by Jason Allen

